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WE ARE SORRY, SAYS SPAIN

Madrid.— Spain has apologised for a column penned by conservative former prime minister Mariano Rajoy contending that France's men's soccer team lacked French players, Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares said this week.

Albares told his French counterpart that Rajoy's "intolerable" remarks, which he said "carry the poison of racism and xenophobia", did not reflect the view of the overwhelming majority of Spaniards.

"It's a very serious matter to go around using skin colour to determine who can be a citizen and who cannot," Albares told Cadena SER radio, hours before Spain and France were to meet in the World Cup semi-finals.

Rajoy, who was premier in 2011-2018, wrote in online publication *El Debate* that France would be a formidable adversary, before questioning the team's "Frenchness" in an apparent reference to some

players' African and Afro-Caribbean heritage.

"France has a squad of the very highest calibre. Mind you, there are no French players in it," he said.

Rajoy could not be immediately reached for comment.

Borja Semper, a spokesperson for Rajoy's Partido Popular (PP), downplayed the issue, saying the column was written without ill intent and was meant as a sarcastic expression.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who was in Paris for France's National Day on Tuesday, had criticised "those who measure nationality by a person's surname, birthplace or skin colour" in a post on X describing Rajoy's words as shamefully xenophobic.

Rajoy's quip, which came days after a scandal over a racist rant by a Paraguayan senator against France captain Kylian Mbappe, was met with rare unity in France.



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