

LL-19/107



Question time: will French presidential candidate Sarkozy give answers to the cluster?

Third degree for would-be French presidents

FRANCE'S maritime cluster has wasted no time plunging into the presidential campaign.

In what looked like an unashamed attempt to benefit from the publicity given to the official designation of interior minister Nicholas Sarkozy as the candidate of the ruling UMP party, the cluster has raced out a list of 15 questions it wants presidential candidates to answer.

If they do not, the threat is that they will incur the wrath of the 317,500 people who work in maritime professions in France and account for an estimated 2%

of gross domestic product. Issued jointly with the Institut Français de la Mer, which, like the cluster, is headed by the ubiquitous Francis Vallat, the questionnaire invites candidates to take up position on a number of issues.

Some questions should be relatively easy to answer, like the one inviting candidates to express their support for the existing French coastal protection system with its use of maritime prefectures and the services of the navy, in the face of proponents in other EU countries of a US-style European coastguard service.

Others could present some problems, like the one pressing candidates to state their support for construction of a second French aircraft carrier or to state what action they would take to prevent owners deserting to other flags in the face of the recently created French international register appearing on the flag of convenience list of the ITF.

The cluster and the IFM have indicated that they will publish candidates' responses in time to allow interested voters to take them into account before they vote in the first round on April 22.