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'Magic is over' for U.S., says French foreign minister

By Alison Smale

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PARIS: Bernard Kouchner, the foreign minister of France and a longtime humanitarian, diplomatic and political activist on the international scene, says that whoever succeeds President George W. Bush may restore something of the United States' battered image and standing overseas, but that "the magic is over."

In a wide-ranging conversation with Roger Cohen of the International Herald Tribune at the launch of a Forum for New Diplomacy in Paris, Kouchner on Tuesday also held out the hope of talking with Hamas, the Palestinian faction that rules the Gaza Strip but has been ostracized by the West and by its Palestinian rival, Fatah, because it opposes peace talks with Israel and denies that Israel has a right to exist.

Asked whether the United States could repair the damage it has suffered to its reputation during the Bush presidency and especially since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Kouchner replied, "It will never be as it was before."

"I think the magic is over," he continued, in what amounted to a sober assessment from one of the strongest supporters in France of the United States.

U.S. military supremacy endures, Kouchner noted, and the new president "will decide what to do - there are many means to re-establish the image." But even that, he predicted, "will take time."

Kouchner began the 90-minute event with a speech that emphasized that "there is not just a new diplomacy; there is a new world."

To those intimidated by or fearful of what seem to be the rising challenges of globalization, climate change, spreading disease or new technology, Kouchner had a simple message: "The great difficulty is to accept this new world."

"There are not more problems - please, have a little memory - than 35 years ago," he said, recalling how, in 1971, he co-founded Médecins Sans Frontières in response to the horrors of the conflict in Nigeria over Biafra.

The challenges may be daunting, he said, noting for instance that the world had decided to act to curb the AIDS epidemic, but asking, "Can we take charge of all the other diseases? I'm not sure."

Some of the most persistent diplomatic challenges emanate from the Middle East, and Kouchner was asked about approaches to Iran, whose president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has called for the destruction of Israel, or to Hamas, which has the same stated goal.

Kouchner and other European diplomats have tried to talk Iran out of its controversial nuclear program, but officially rejected all contacts with Hamas, which is listed as a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union. Asked whether there is a way to engage Hamas, which is

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supported by a significant minority of Palestinians, Kouchner appeared to hold out hope of contact, saying: "I'm looking for a diplomatic way to say yes."

He then carefully couched this statement by noting that, in general, "we have to talk with our enemies," and that Fatah, which controls the West Bank, "always said they were in favor" of unity talks with Hamas. But after Hamas routed Fatah forces from Gaza in June, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah, has refused to deal with Hamas, which he accused of committing a coup. Kouchner, of the Socialist left in France, stirred controversy when he accepted the offer from President Nicolas Sarkozy, leader of the Gaullist center-right, to join his government last May.

At the end of the conversation, held in a glittering hall at the Académie Diplomatique Internationale, the IHT's partner in the new diplomatic forum, Kouchner denied that his activism had been curbed by the need to run the resplendent Foreign Ministry on the Quai d'Orsay and France's large diplomatic machinery around the world.

But he conceded that practicing the new diplomacy - which he defined as being action that is more practical, multifaceted and realistic than mere protocol calls and visits - "is very difficult, and very time-consuming."