

First Islamic school opens in France

LILLE: The first Muslim high school in France opened its doors on Tuesday with several female teachers and pupils wearing headscarves usually banned from public schools in this majority Catholic country.

The private Lycee Averroes, named after a prominent 12th-century Islamic philosopher from Spain, welcomed a dozen teenagers – six boys and six girls – in its five-room premises above a mosque in the northern city of Lille. "Our teaching is in French, the teachers are all accredited, the programme is the same as elsewhere, the class is co-education and wearing a veil is allowed for girls but not obligatory," said School Deputy Principal Makhoulf Mameche.

The school, which hopes to expand in coming years and is open to non-Muslims as well, is financed mostly by donations from the faithful "without any foreign support," he added.

Foreign support is a sensitive issue in France because some mosques financed from abroad, mainly Saudi Arabia, are suspected of spreading radical Islam among disaffected Muslim youths. France, whose five million Muslims make Islam the country's second-largest religion, created a special council earlier this year to maintain regular contact with its fractured Muslim community and integrate it better into society.

Rigorously secular public schools have alienated some Muslims by barring headscarves, a growing trend among Muslim girls. About one-fifth of French pupils attend private schools, but they are mostly run by the Catholic Church. "We are not a religious establishment but we offer Muslim culture as an option," Mameche told journalists. Among the options are courses on Islam and Arabic language lessons.

The teachers, six men and four women, have all taught in French high schools before joining the new Lycee, he added. The school failed three times to get permission from local authorities to operate before it finally won approval by going to national education authorities. Mr Mameche said approval came so late that the school could not recruit more pupils this year. —Reuters