

Algeria cannot be left alone

Dawn
3/11

Africa By Flora Lewis

THE atrocious butcheries in Algeria have reached a dramatic new scale just as public opinion in the West is turning from ignorance to apathy to outrage.

There is a comparison with Bosnia in the sense that it took a year or more for people elsewhere to realize the horror and then begin demanding with increasing insistence that their governments "do something."

European governments, and to a somewhat lesser extent the US government, are facing that kind of public pressure now. They recognize that they can no longer pretend not to notice. But so far they cannot think of what to do beyond express repugnance, and talk to each other about it.

There is lots of talk going on. Algeria is on the agenda of practically every European Union meeting, and Washington is checking the European capitals. Germany's foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, has pro-

posed the dispatch of an EU special mission to look into the situation and see what might be done to help suppress the terrorism and aid the victims.

The Algerian government has not yet officially responded, but it has rejected all previous suggestions as intolerable interference.

It denies the scope of the killings despite documented reports in the Algerian media, whose journalists have shown awesome courage at the real risk of their own lives, and claims that it is getting the situation "under control."

There can be no question of sending in outside force so long as the Algerian government is recognized as legitimate and refuses any kind of intervention or mediation. In any event, what would foreign troops or advisers do? What would be their mission? There is no useful answer.

Does this mean that nothing can be done except gasp in dismay, issue statements and perhaps pass resolutions? People in Algeria feel aban-

doned. They can't believe that no one will help to stop such crimes against humanity, but they don't know where to appeal.

The Algerian government angrily denounced as "unacceptable" a formal French statement condemning these "acts of barbaric savagery" and noting the "legitimate right of the Algerian population to be protected." French, which has been generally supportive of the government up to now, had kept a low profile on the issue. Despite its special importance to people here, did not specify who is to blame.

The role of the government and army has been murky. There are rumours that sometimes they have been responsible for crimes in order to rally the disaffected population against Islamic extremists fighting for power. There have been no proofs. But it has been widely noticed that even when there have been military installations quite nearby and the massacres go on for hours, no one has come to the

defence of the victims.

It is a poignant example of the dilemma of the law of nations, the right of unquestioned sovereignty versus the duty to provide the most basic human right, the right not to be murdered.

So it is essential to find a way to put some pressure on the Algerian government. A coalition of important countries — and it must be coordinated — should tell the government that if it is unable to protect its people, they will be sympathetic to a request for help. And if it is unwilling, they can no longer provide international support through such institutions as the World Bank and credit arrangements.

This is not sanctions, which almost surely could not be organized and would disrupt the world oil market beyond what anybody is ready to accept as well as put the main burden of punishment on the suffering population.

Is it blackmail? yes, and well justified, leaving it up to Algiers how

much it wants to be inconvenienced and isolated. The benefits of full participation in the international community require the observation of certain minimum human standards.

It would be of great help if Islamic authorities, voices of the religious community as well as of governments, spoke loudly to denounce the murders as violations of the meaning of Islam.

Surprisingly, the Iranian government, which Algiers has held responsible for supporting the terrorists, has openly called for measures by the United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to "prevent such inhuman acts."

Western governments can quietly encourage friendly Arab states to join the chorus of opprobrium.

Something does have to be done. It is not easy, because the familiar tools do not work. It takes creative diplomacy to find the effective pressure points. Just to give up and weep in despair helps no one. This is what the concept of international community is supposed to be about.—Dawn/IHT Service