

As massacres continue ^{Africa}

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IN January 1992 after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a large majority in the initial round of Algeria's first multi-party elections, the military authorities cancelled the second round and imposed a state of emergency. FIS was outlawed. Its supporters formed armed opposition groups. Civil war began.

In the six years of conflict, up to 80,000 people have been killed. Tens of thousands have been the victims of arbitrary detention and torture or have simply 'disappeared.' Last year, the death toll rose with a series of massacres. The Algerian authorities blame all the killings on Islamist terrorist groups, but their own security forces are also responsible for countless deaths.

From butchering entire families of "traitors," to razing guerilla hide-outs with napalm, to engaging in terrorist bombings in France, the tragedy is strangely reminiscent of Pierre Joseph Proudhon's "revolution permanente." Irrespective of its ideological orientation, the crisis is shaped by the familiar patterns of violence and counter-violence, retaliation and retribution, generated by the pursuit of thwarted political goals by deadly means.

Indeed, the conflict broadly follows the pattern of the Algerian-French war of the fifties and early sixties about which George J. Andreopoulos had said: "One of [its] most disturbing features is the indiscriminate use of violence as a means both of instilling fear in the enemy and of rallying supporters to the cause."

The targeting of innocents (children or spouses of security officers, for instance) inevitably provokes repressive measures of the same indiscriminate nature, in a spiral of violence leading to a new "form of total war, a war waged not against the guerillas but against the people as a whole." The ultimate result is that both sides have succeeded in alienating the very people on whose behalf the struggle is being relentlessly waged. The true characteristics of a politically confused society whose aims and objects are entwined with the elements of colonization and its effects. In trying to suppress the insurgency Algerian officials occasionally close down

massacres and other human rights abuses. But those who want such international action face two problems. The first is oil. 'Europe, and the world in general, is more interested in buying Algerian oil and Algerian gas than in acting to protect the Algerian people and develop democracy.' The second problem is the fear of the Islamists, the belief that the government is protecting society from religious extremism — protecting democracy, secularism, women's rights and other such values against obscurantist onslaughts.

The international community has for years shunned its responsibilities in the face of a grave human tragedy. This indifference and the absence of efforts to stop the devastating civil war should not continue. For years the cries for help of victims of violence and anarchy in Algeria and the efforts of human rights organizations to draw attention to the human rights situation in that beleaguered country have received little response.

The UN Human Rights Commission has, year after year, carefully avoided addressing the issue of the human rights situation in Algeria. The European Union and Parliament too have tended to be evasive. Beyond condemning violence and human rights violations in general terms and asking the military-backed Algerian government to seek a solution of the conflict through the democratic process of elections, no concrete steps have been recommended by them to bring an end to the civil war. Whilst condemning killings and other acts of violence against the civilian population, the European Parliament does not condemn the failure of the state to protect the civilian population, nor does it recommend any action to ensure such protection.

The double-standard approach of the international community to the human rights crisis in Algeria is blatantly obvious when noting the position they have taken on Algerian asylum-seekers: After the killing of some 100 foreigners in Algeria and the death threats issued by the GIA against foreigners, most western governments took far-reaching protection measures for their embassies in Algeria and advised their citizens not to travel to Algeria. They took such

officials occasionally close down lieux de culte unofficial prayer places) and accuse the "fundamentalists" of hijacking religion for political gain.

They have produced a new constitution banning religious political parties — obviously on a mistaken belief that secularism can be decreed by law. In their time, the nationalist insurgents were branded by the French as "obscurantists", "terrorists" and "outlaws," the exact terms used today by Algerian generals to portray the Islamist militants. While they both have referred to themselves as "mujahedeen," the present-day Islamist insurgents, like their nationalist predecessors, seek to achieve essentially secular goals, irrespective of the religious overtones of their utterances and claims.

In its radical expression, the Islamist movement bears an uncanny resemblance to other social and political revolts. It is perceived as messianic and totalitarian not because it is Islamic but because it is revolutionary. It is this revolutionary dimension that spurred NATO's fears in 1995 of a regional spillover threatening its southern flank and inspired a section of the western press to raise alarm over a spreading 'Islamic menace.'

Over the past year the civilian population has been targeted, reflecting a pattern of massacres of large numbers of civilians, many of them women and children, in rural areas. The pattern has become increasingly widespread, often a daily occurrence. Villagers have been massacred in the most brutal ways — slaughtered, decapitated, and mutilated with knives, machetes and saws; some have been shot dead and others burned alive as their homes were set on fire. As a result of these massacres thousands of people have fled their villages, some because their homes were destroyed or burned down, but most from fear of further attacks.

The security forces have not intervened during these massacres. The question that remains unanswered is why there was no intervention. Newspapers close to the authorities have often reported that the security forces could not intervene because the terrain around the villages where the massacres were committed had been mined by those who committed the massacres to prevent the security forces' intervention.

However, this seems unlikely given that during many massacres villagers managed to flee to safety and after the killing stopped returned to their villages without stepping on any mines. If such movements were possible both during and after the massacres, it should also have been possible for security forces to go into the villages to stop the killing.

Internationally, a wall of silence and political indifference has been raised to keep the happenings in Algeria out of focus. Salima Ghezali, a teacher-turned-journalist and winner of a string of human rights awards, wants the international community to act to end the brutal civil war. She backs the Amnesty International's call for the immediate appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Algeria, and an international investigation to determine responsibility for the

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measures because they considered that the risks were serious and that the Algerian authorities could not provide adequate protection for their nationals.

On the other hand, Algerians who had hoped to escape death by seeking refuge in western countries have had their asylum claim rejected on the basis that "it could not be proved that they would be in danger in their country", or that "it could not be proved that they could not obtain protection from the authorities of their country." This is in spite of the fact that tens of thousands of Algerians have been killed and that killings, massacres, "disappearances" and other grave abuses are a daily occurrence.

If a handful of foreigners, who in most cases live in much safer conditions than Algerians, cannot be adequately protected, how can it be argued that Algerians who are the overwhelming majority of the victims of violence are not at risk? By adopting such a position, western governments have shown that they do not attach the same value to the life of Algerians as they do to the lives of their own nationals.

Moreover, not only have western governments failed to grant protection to Algerian asylum seekers, but also they have made it virtually impossible for Algerians to obtain visas to their countries, thus denying them the possibility of escaping death.

While the world turns a blind eye to the massacres in Algeria, hundreds face death every day. Algerians no longer lead normal lives. Schools and colleges are periodically closed. Businesses are frequently disrupted and industrial activity has virtually halted. As time passes the situation is deteriorating, more families are being torn apart, more children are being deprived of normal upbringing and a promising future. The entire fabric of society is slowly being shredded. Countless lives are withering in the inferno of civil strife.

With limited means to protect themselves, the Algerians live in fear of death, praying to God to spare their lives. Thrown to their cruel fate, they limp on and look around desperately for a flicker of hope — for a helping hand to get them out of the pit of terror and death.