**Adding insult to injury**

[**Dr James J Zogby**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-james-j-zogby)

November 01, 2022

This past week, a major US daily paper ran a lengthy feature article reporting on France’s repatriating to Algeria 24 skulls reputed to be the decapitated heads of Algerian resistance fighters. The piece was both shocking and infuriating.

Instead of unearthing the obscene history behind this entire affair, the story’s focus was that only six of the skulls could be properly identified as belonging to Algerian fighters with the other 18 being of unknown background. With both governments apparently intent on ignoring the questionable provenance of the skulls, the transfer was heralded as a “powerful gesture” and a “milestone in (France’s and Algeria’s) efforts to rebuild ties.” In the end, the story raised more questions than it answered and revealed a past, as one Algerian historian noted, “which spoke volumes about colonial barbarism.”

The Algerian skulls were reputed to be the heads of resistance leaders and civilians beheaded during France’s 19th-century conquest of North Africa. According to the report, they had been “displayed on poles” and were “taken back to France as war trophies.” They were part of a collection of 18,000 human bones culled from former French colonies and housed in Paris’ Museum of Mankind. Among the thousands of skeletal remains in the collection were bones from across Africa, North America, and Asia. Brought to France by members of the French military and archeologists, they were then turned over to the museum as part of an effort to study and categorise racial differences.

[Sanaullah labels Imran as ‘political terrorist’, says no to negotiations](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Nov-2022/sanaullah-labels-imran-as-political-terrorist-says-no-to-negotiations)

France’s repatriation of these skulls is only one of about 20 such French returns of remains to other countries, and, in this instance, can only be considered incomplete—France is only “lending” them to Algeria for a “period of five years.”

While this entire affair is sordid in itself, equally disturbing is the fact that it was masked by both governments, who, apparently hungry for a diplomatic victory, presented the return as an important step in rebuilding ties. While rapprochement is to be heralded, “renting” the bones of Algerian martyrs is a crude, backhanded, and woefully inadequate way of accomplishing this objective.

France would have done better to offer a full-throated apology for the horrors inflicted on the Algerian people during its century-long conquest, settler colonial occupation, and brutal repression. The closest it has come is French President Macron’s recent and rather lame “both sides suffered” remarks.

[NA speaker rejects disqualification reference against Asif Zardari](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Nov-2022/na-speaker-rejects-disqualification-reference-against-asif-zardari)

What remains on the table is France’s need to offer some form of reparations for the damage it did to Algeria and its people. Instead of taking such a step, France made the obscene gesture of a return of decapitated skulls—a reminder of its brutality and inhumanity.

I write this out of my continued frustration with the way the French and the West, in general, continue to parade themselves as the world’s bearers of civilisation, culture, and values while caricaturing the peoples of the East or the South as lesser species. Their racialist “scientists” in the Museum of Mankind measured cranial capacity in the skulls they studied to demonstrate white superiority. Their social scientists studied what they considered inferior cultures, while their political and military leaders conquered the lands of these “lesser peoples,” imposed themselves on them, and despoiled their resources to serve the higher purposes of Western countries. In Algeria alone, millions were killed or allowed to die from disease and starvation in the interests of France and its people.

[Senate chairman Sadiq Sanjrani meets Punjab CM Pervaiz Elahi](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Nov-2022/senate-chairman-sadiq-sanjrani-meets-punjab-cm-pervaiz-elahi)

France was no different than many other Western colonial powers, most notably: Great Britain, Portugal, Spain, Germany, and the United States. The worldwide wreckage and human suffering left in the wake of their conquests and exploitative rule are not just a matter of history. The damage done continues to shape the present-day realities of their victim nations.

The bottom line is clear: The West built its wealth and its pretence of a civilised democratic order on the backs and bones of those whom they crushed. To move forward, there must be an acknowledgment of and reckoning for the damage done, and then actions taken in the name of restorative justice. Sending back skulls that only serve to remind the victims of past evil adds insult to injury.