

# Libya-Chad conflict becomes regional

by Thierry Lalevée

In less than a month since Libya started its new offensive in Northern Chad, the military and political stakes have gone much higher. The military battles since Dec. 12, are not over control of a piece of desert, but once again over the political leadership of the Sahel and North African region.

For Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's terrorist dictator, the offensive in Chad has become his revenge for the American raid against Tripoli last April 15. If he wins his gambit, radical changes in his favor will occur in the Sahel and even North Africa. So far, he is on the road to victory.

Chad's two most outspoken allies, the United States and France, have all but remained passive. Despite the discussions in late November between U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and France's President François Mitterrand and Premier Jacques Chirac, Washington has done little to make its commitment to defend Chad from a new Libyan aggression concrete. In mid-December, it promised a \$15 million military package; less than half has been delivered so far.

France's passivity is close to becoming utter betrayal. Paris had promised that once Libya crossed the 16th parallel, it would intervene. Qaddafi crossed it twice on Jan. 4, to bombard the towns of Oum Chalaba and Arada, and Paris has remained silent. Moreover, the very position, expressed repeatedly, according to which any military events north of the 16th parallel were mere internal matters between Chad and Libya, smacks of a dirty deal. It acknowledges Libya's claim that Chad is to be partitioned.

That is indeed what the November 1984 summit meeting in Crete between President Mitterrand and Libya's Qaddafi was about. In an interview on Jan. 6 with the daily *Libération*, Qaddafi stressed that according to what was "agreed on in Crete," "if the French troops intervene, I am entitled to intervene south of the 16th parallel." Whether the agreement was formulated in such a blunt way, remains to be seen; the substance is most likely correct.

Since the Dec. 12 offensive began, President Mitterrand underlined *ad nauseam* that the Libyan policy of annexation of Northern Chad, was no concern of Paris." There will be no intervention north of the 16th parallel," said Mitterrand to

then-visiting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. That statement, made only a few hours after Libyan tanks moved in, was aimed at preempting Premier Chirac's government from taking a different position: There is an obvious internal dimension in Mitterrand's declaration. However, Mitterrand is a leading member of the Socialist International. As already was true in November 1984, a deal with Qaddafi is a proxy deal with Moscow.

## Moscow upgrades presence in Libya

It was only a few days after the visit to Moscow of Libya's Foreign Secretary Mohammed al Mansour, that Libya unleashed its offensive. With the appointment of Pogos Akopov as new Soviet ambassador to Tripoli in November, Libya has been upgraded in the mind of Moscow's rulers. Soviet ambassador to Kuwait until then, Akopov was regularly identified as one of Moscow's crucial envoys in the region, part of the Islamintern apparatus of Politburo member Geidar Aliyev. During Akopov's tenure, Kuwait became—together with Beirut and Damascus—one of the most important centers of Soviet intelligence operations.

Local observers have recently reported a doubling of Soviet and East German activities in Libya, while the Chad government warned that Soviet advisers were spotted in the Aouzou strip. They are involved in two crucial jobs. First is the completion under their control of a 1,850 kilometer coastal defense system aimed at preventing military landing, especially around Tripoli and Benghazi. Second, in the middle of Libya's desert close to the Zuweyah military base, they are building a radio transmission station which will be able to intercept all American and French military transmissions from the Sahel to Morocco and the Mediterranean. It is being coupled with more traditional radio and television broadcasting networks designed to jam the local broadcasts of neighboring countries, such as Mali or Niger. Particularly targeted is Tunisia, where the French maintain a communications listening post in the south, which intercepts all communications between Tripoli and Northern Chad.

Events of the last month have proved that Libyans are very poor fighters. On Jan. 2, the Chadian governmental forces of President Hissène Habré were able to take over the airport of Fada, north of the 16th parallel. It was later confirmed that more than 700 Libyan soldiers were killed in the fighting. The same day, a military column which had left the capital of Chad, N'jamena, some 10 days earlier reached the outskirts of Zouar in the Tibesti desert, seized by the Libyans on Dec. 28. Joining with the GUNT (former Chadian rebel) forces of Goukouni Weddei, who is still under house arrest in Tripoli, the government troops repelled the Libyans. Already in 1983 Habré had retaken the north of his country, but he was savagely driven out as Libya's flotilla of jet bombers and Tupolov 22's bombarded his troops to the ground, using then, as now, napalm and poison gas. That seems to be on the way to being repeated.