

Chad strikes blow against Qaddafi

by Mary Lalevée

On Sept. 5, two thousand troops from Chad's national armed forces struck a major blow against Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, by launching a completely unexpected attack against one of Libya's three air bases in the south of the country. Sweeping 100 kilometers into Libya on Toyota trucks, the Chadian troops drove straight over minefields laid to protect the base of Maaten al-Sara, and in a 24-hour operation, killed 1,713 Libyan soldiers, took 312 prisoners, and destroyed nearly 30 Libyan planes and helicopters on the ground, 70 tanks, and a large quantity of other arms and munitions. Chad's losses were 65 dead and 112 injured.

Chad forces took 312 prisoners, including two Yugoslav advisers and one East German "technician." Chad's ambassador in Paris declared that Chad had no intention of permanently occupying the base: "We only wanted to destroy one of the main sources of aggression against Chad." He said that Chad has no air force, and was hence obliged to launch ground operations to stop constant Libyan air raids against northern parts of his country. "What the Libyans do by air, the Chadians do on the ground," he said.

Built in 1979, Maatan al-Sara had been modernized in the last 18 months to become Libya's major air base for air attacks against eastern Chad, and potential assaults against Chad, Sudan, and Egypt. Libya has stepped up its air attacks on Chad since the beginning of this year, in its effort to maintain control of the Aouzou Strip, part of northern Chad, which Libya claims, and had occupied until Chad troops temporarily seized control in August.

The Chadian raid was led by 31-year-old Commander Djamous, who was responsible for major Chadian victories at Fada and Ouadi Doum earlier this year. He personally led troops in trucks over Libyan-laid minefields at Ouadi Doum, to prove that driving over the mines at 90 kilometers an hour causes a three-second delay before they explode. He was badly injured, using his own technique of "three seconds for a mine," but is now back in action and led the troops at Maatan al Sara.

The success of the raid confirms that the Libyan troops are no match for a well-organized and nationally motivated army, even far smaller in number and less well-equipped. Libya did retake the town of Aouzou, in the disputed Aouzou Strip, from Chad forces on Sept. 1, because of the sheer violence and intensity of Libyan air raids.

Chad's successful operation is not just another incident

in a desert war far away in Africa, but is a major blow to Qaddafi, and to his Soviet backers, and Chad's President Habré should be applauded for his troops' victory. Qaddafi has sent terrorists into Europe and the United States, and agents into the Middle East and Africa preaching his brand of "Islamic Revolution," and up till now, efforts to counter Qaddafi's terrorism and subversion have been remarkably ineffective.

Western sabotage?

Some appeasers in Europe and the United States, like French President François Mitterrand, who were only too happy to see Habré defeated in Aouzou, out of fear that a military destabilization of Qaddafi, or even his ouster by dissatisfied Libyan army elements, would endanger broader international negotiations with the Soviet Union, are now trying to prevent Hissène Habré from taking further action. Indeed, there are reports that shortages of arms, especially anti-aircraft missiles, were one of the reasons Hissène Habré was forced to withdraw his troops from the Aouzou Strip.

However, Qaddafi's own actions may contribute to ending this appeasement. Qaddafi reacted to the humiliating defeat of his troops by sending Libyan bombers to attack Chad's capital, Ndjamen, and the town of Abeche in eastern Chad on Sept. 7. One of these was shot down by French troops protecting the capital. The Libyan ambassador in Paris announced that Libya now considered itself in a "state of war" with France. Declaring that it will not fight Libya directly, the French Defense Ministry has announced that its military deployment in Chad will be strengthened, and a new air base, around Abeche, will be completed as soon as possible. It also reiterated that whenever the Libyans try to bombard Chadian cities, French forces will defend them. The United States is reported to have sent additional supplies of anti-aircraft missiles, and will possibly send Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

Meanwhile, at the initiative of Gen. Revault d'Allones and General Massu, a "Committee for the Full Liberation of Chad" has been created in Paris. It advocates a more offensive policy against Libya, and is lobbying the French government for direct military support to retake Aouzou. The French government's official position is that the dispute over the Aouzou Strip should be settled by "negotiation." While Prime Minister Jacques Chirac has stressed his support for Chad's fight to defend its integrity, i.e., including the Aouzou Strip, Mitterrand's position is more ambiguous.

While the Arab League and some Arab governments, like Algeria and Sudan, have declared their support for Qaddafi in the face of Chad's "imperialist" attack on Libya's territory, as Libya describes it, Qaddafi's desperation can be seen by the fact that he has now distanced himself from the Ayatollah Khomeini, and is calling on Iran to end the Gulf War. Decisive Western action against these two representatives of Islamic fundamentalism could bring their repressive regimes to an end.