

HUMAN
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WATCH

Supported by France, Convicted by Africa
France-Chad Relations during the Hissène Habré's Rule (1982-1990)

Summary

On May 30, 2016, in an historic trial, the former president of Chad (1982-1990), Hissène Habré, was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity, torture, war crimes, and rape by the Extraordinary African Chambers in the Senegalese court system.

The trial marks the first time the courts of one nation have tried the former head of state of another for massive human rights violations. It is also the first time the courts of an African country, supported by the African Union and the international community, have organized a trial of such international significance.

The Human Rights Watch report, “Supported by France, Convicted by Africa,” exposes France’s longtime association, complex but close, with Hissène Habré, an association begun before he came to power and maintained up until the end of his rule. During this period of close involvement French authorities twice launched massive military operations to protect Habré’s hold on power, providing funding and direct military assistance as well as technical support. France also extended support clandestinely, in some cases directly funding known mercenaries, in others actively coordinating efforts itself.

The French authorities’ support for Hissène Habré came at a time when France, given its extensive presence in Chad, should have known that massive crimes were being committed by its close ally.

While French authorities have, in the past, supported governments responsible for grave violations of human rights, the Habré government in Chad was singular in terms of the sheer brutality of its crimes and their widespread, systematic implementation, as described by the court at his sentencing.

Three crucial events determined France’s policy: Libya’s intervention in Chad and alliance with Goukouni Oueddei, Francois Mitterrand’s election in 1981, and the CIA’s wide-ranging involvement as Habré’s ally. Wary at the outset of backing Habré in such circumstances, by the end of 1981 Mitterrand’s government had become a steady, robust ally, principally in response to pressure from France’s African allies and the United States to intervene against Libya’s expansionist objectives. It was only when Habré began to collaborate more extensively with the United States, helping the CIA train Libyan exiles in Chad as an armed opposition to Gaddafi (“Operation Haftar”) that France decided to end its support. In the view of the French government, Chad clearly had to remain central to its foreign policy and not fall under US control. To the surprise of the US, France allowed Habré’s ex-chief of staff Idriss Déby to take power in Habré’s place.

On June 7, 1982 Hissène Habré , leader of the Armed Forces of the North (FAN), seized power in Chad with the discreet but decisive support of France and the United States. Habré was already known for violent practices given his kidnappings of several foreign nationals in the 1970's and the discovery, in 1980, of mass graves surrounding his general headquarters in N'Djamena. He was nevertheless seen as the only political-military leader in Chad determinedly opposed to Gaddafi who was seeking to expand his influence in sub-Saharan Africa, beginning with Chad and whose efforts to conquer a portion of Chad's territory were a secret to no one.

While support for Habré within Ronald Reagan's US administration seemed unanimous, this was not the case in France, where different agencies (executive, diplomatic, intelligence) supporting various actors in Chad at the same time. As a result, there was tentativeness and hesitation for some time as to how much aid to provide Habré. In eastern Chad, Habré was leading an open struggle against Goukouni's pro-Libyan government, which had France's official diplomatic support. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was nevertheless discreetly aiding Habré via the French Secret Service right up until the May 1981 French presidential elections that brought the Socialist party to power. From the moment he assumed office, François Mitterrand had to grapple with "the mess in Chad."

Anxious at first not to interfere in Chad's internal affairs, the Mitterrand government officially supported Goukouni Oueddei's government. At that very moment, however, Bob Denard, a French mercenary with close connections inside French intelligence, was backing Habré in his push to seize power. Once Habré had assumed control, France quickly restored official relations with him.

France first threw its full weight behind Habré in the summer of 1983 during the battle of Faya-Largeau, sending around thirty mercenaries, according to a number of sources, to fight alongside Habré against the pro-Libyan forces of the Transitional Government of National Unity (GUNT), even as Habré's forces were committing horrific atrocities on the battlefield. Several weeks later, France initiated Operation Manta (1983-1984). With over 3,000 soldiers it was the largest French military undertaking since the Algerian war. It was followed by Operation Epervier (1986-2015), in which an air unit was sent to N'Djamena as a deterrent shield against Libyan offensives.

For most of Habré's rule, at least until a few months before his fall, France provided Habré massive military assistance, lavishing training on his army and intelligence service as cooperation with Chad in security matters deepened.

For example, each division of the Chadian defense command had its own French military advisor, even as it was committing grave atrocities. Transall military aircraft were sometimes used to transport the government's political prisoners during Operation Epervier. France also delivered an

impressive quantity of arms to the Chad government, although the regime made only one actual arms purchase—in 1990.

France was extending support even as Habré's government became increasingly culpable of mass atrocities. Human Rights Watch has worked with Habré's victims since 1999. Its numerous investigations in Chad led HRW to conclude that Habré's government was guilty of numerous political killings, the systematic use of torture, thousands of arbitrary arrests, and the targeted persecution of ethnic groups. The judges in Habré's trial confirmed these allegations, affirming that crimes against humanity, war crimes, rape and torture were committed throughout Habré's rule.

A majority of the crimes were committed by the Direction de la Documentation et de la Sécurité (DDS), essentially the president's personal secret police. France's Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE) had ongoing relations with the DDS. Chadian agents, for example, received extensive French training in Chad, as indicated in a DDS file dated July 23, 1988 describing the training given eight DDS agents by two DGSE operatives. Chadians were trained in France, as well, most notably in the case of Idriss Déby Itno, Chad's current president and ex-Army Chief of Staff, but also, and more to the point, in that of Guihini Koreï, ex-director of the DDS and Habré's nephew, known for cruelty to prisoners and DDS agents alike. Both attended classes at the École Militaire in Paris.

The repressiveness of Habré's government was not a secret. While the extent of its brutality was not made public until after his fall, numerous atrocities were already well-documented at the time in the international press and by organizations such as Amnesty International. But French authorities, aware as they were of the atrocities, did not pull back on aid to the government. Numerous French officials visited Chad, and Habré attended all high level multilateral meetings between Francophone African countries and France. Habré was even invited as guest of honor to review the 1987 Bastille Day military parade along Paris' Champs-Élysées.

In the end, only after France became aware of the ever-closer links between Habré and the US under Reagan, which was allowed to recover military hardware seized from Libya by Chad and to assemble a Libyan army, supposedly to fight Gaddafi, did it begin to distance itself from Habré. According to a recent statement by Claude Silberzahn, ex-DGSE director (1989-1993):

He [Hissène Habré] gave me to understand that he didn't need us anymore. He didn't need France anymore, for that matter. He had another ally and he could do without us. At that moment he was signing his own death-warrant.

Chad has always played a special role in French policy in Africa: a virtual “aircraft carrier in the desert,” this landlocked territory has often accommodated French military operations. Chad hosted the French army twice under Habré, during the Manta and Epervier operations. Even today, in the spring of 2016, Chad is one of the bases for Operation Barkhane, one of the largest of France’s current military operations, with 3,000 soldiers, several hundred transport vehicles, airplanes and helicopters.

Human Rights Watch possesses a significant volume of material, most notably hundreds of interviews of survivors and witnesses, as well as copies of thousands of DDS files, which illustrate how the Habré government received the unwavering support of Western powers even as it was committing crimes against humanity, war crimes, and systematic torture, as the judges for the Extraordinary African Chambers acknowledged.

At a time when France continues to wield political influence in Africa, this Human Rights Watch report focuses on the French authorities’ aid to Habré. The report “Enabling a Dictator: The United States and Chad’s Hissène Habré 1982-1990s,” issued the same date as this report, in turn analyzes the close association between Habré and the Reagan administration. In doing so, Human Rights Watch does not overlook the major support provided Habré by other countries such as Iraq, Zaire, and Egypt, which at the time saw Chad as a solid bulwark against Libyan hegemony under Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Nor does the organization minimize the fact that crimes were also committed by the other parties to the Chadian conflict as well, such as Libya and the factions it supported.

This report is a reminder to the French authorities of the impact their decisions and policies can have on human rights in allied foreign countries such as Chad. The French government must actively join in efforts to advance transitional justice, particularly in countries where it has played a dominant role. France contributed 300,000 euros to the budget of the Extraordinary African Chambers in Dakar. This special court was created to try international crimes committed in Chad during Habré’s rule. France also helped arrange the visit of an international rogatory commission of African Chambers judges for a hearing with a Chadian national living in the Paris region. In a 2007 visit to Dakar, ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy pledged to Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade France’s judicial and financial support for the Habré trial.

Nevertheless, France must also conduct investigations to help the public understand the extent of its own role in aiding authoritarian regimes now on trial. The French government, for example, has refused to declassify documents in the presidential archive from this period, arguing that doing so would « pose an inordinate threat to French foreign policy interests protected under the law ».

This report shows how important French aid, in terms of equipment, training, and financial support, was to Habré's government. As this nearly constant, largely uncritical support flowed, France never truly attempted to use its influence to halt flagrant human rights violations. As ex-French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas recently stated:

As soon as Hissène Habré became a strategically important leader of a strategically important country, there was an inclination to leave him alone. The position he occupied was so important for the French, and for the Americans, too, that he was allowed whatever he wanted. We turned a blind eye to what he was doing in his country. As soon as he was told "All we ask is for you to run the country. Do whatever you like," how could you expect him not to take advantage?