

Africa Report by Mary Lalevée

Mitterrand's cynical courtship

The French President pretends he's the friend of Africa, but he's doing nothing except to enforce the IMF's austerity.

Only weeks before the French legislative elections on March 16, the question of French policy toward Africa is perhaps the leading issue in the campaign. French aircraft are in action in the former colony of Chad; French troops in Central Africa are on alert; and African heads of state are consulting in Paris with President François Mitterrand about Libya's destabilization of Chad, the African economic crisis, and the debt.

President Mitterrand presents himself publicly as the great friend of Africa. He has made repeated calls for "solidarity" with African nations and for "north-south cooperation." At the end of last year, at the annual Franco-African summit, Mitterrand promised French support for the Organization of African Unity's call for an emergency summit on African debt.

But behind the rhetoric, the French President is acting as the enforcer for the genocidal economic austerity policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He has done nothing to address the economic and political crisis in Africa.

Sources in the French cooperation ministry have stated, for example, that pressure was applied on the former colony of Guinea, to force the government there to submit to IMF demands for a currency devaluation of 1,300%.

Mitterrand played a prominent role at two recent international conferences which dealt with Africa. The first was an otherwise minor meeting on "The Tree and the Forest," organized by the French ministry of agriculture in Paris Feb. 5-7. It became a

major event thanks to Mitterrand's personal patronage and presence, as forestry experts discussing the danger to the world's forests posed by spreading desertification in the developing sector, were no doubt surprised to find no fewer than 10 heads of state and heads of government attending.

Next was the first-ever of heads of state summit of French-speaking countries, held in Paris Feb. 17-20, which focused largely on the Libyan-backed offensive in Chad, which began a few days before. Mitterrand opened the conference of more than 40 French-speaking nations, among them 22 African countries.

Africa's economic problems were also a focus of discussions at the conference, which was officially dedicated to reviving the French language and creating a kind of French "Commonwealth." Senegal's President Abdou Diouf called for a Euro-African conference on Africa's debt crisis, and Madagascar's President Ratsiraka called for debt rescheduling for the whole of Africa.

But what about Mitterrand? Look at his policy toward Chad, whose government had appealed for French assistance in repelling the Libyan-backed rebels who launched an offensive on Feb. 11. Despite promises of resolute action to uphold France's commitments to the Chad government, nothing decisive has yet been done to deter Qaddafi's puppets.

Rebel columns, backed by Libyan artillery and commanded by Libyan Colonel Rifi, began an advance on three fronts across the "Red Line" di-

viding government-held territory from rebel-held areas (the 16th parallel), scoring some initial successes, taking the garrison of Kouba Olonga, and attacking towards Ziguéy in the West and Oum Chalouba and Abeche in the East. The Chad government of His-sene Habre immediately called for French help, and Mitterrand's adviser on African affairs, Guy Penne, flew to Chad's capital city of N'Djamena. Two days later, French Defense Minister Paul Quilès arrived.

French promises of accelerated deliveries of military equipment were followed on Feb. 16 with the attack by 15 French Jaguar fighter bombers on the Libyan-built airstrip at Ouadi Doum, north of the 16th parallel.

Direct Libyan involvement in the fighting had been a precondition for active French participation, and evidence of that was certainly not lacking. It included captured Libyan prisoners, French radio intercepts of rebel communications run by Libyans, and reconnaissance flights showing Libyan artillery positions.

But French assistance has been strictly limited. Some French papers predicted that up to 1,500 French troops would be sent to Chad, yet this has not materialized, and the "deterrent force" now in place consists mainly of air power backed by 500 men whose task is to secure N'Djamena airport and man surface-to-air missiles.

Defense Minister Quilès said that France did not intend to retaliate for an air-raid carried out on Feb. 17 by Libya. France has also ruled out any repeat of the 1983 "Operation Stin-gray," in which it sent 3,000 soldiers to man a defensive line several hundred miles north of the capital city.

The Nigerian foreign minister is due to arrive in Paris in the next few days, to discuss the crisis.