

## Africa Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Can Qaddafi win in Chad?

*The stakes in the Tibesti desert are much more than a few hectares of arid land.*

Since Dec. 12, one of the bloodiest episodes in the Libyan occupation of northern Chad has opened. Libyan air force and artillery have held three of the main villages of the northern Chadian region of the Tibesti—Zouar, Bardai, and Yebbi-Bou—under continuous bombardment, and have extensively used poison gas.

The roots of the conflict go back to September, when Goukouni-Weddeï, then leader of the Tripoli-based Chadian opposition movement, GUNT, decided to rally to the defense of Chad's President Hissein Habré. After a pitched gun-battle in his Tripoli residence, Goukouni was wounded and sent to a hospital where he has been kept under house-arrest ever since. However, his followers in the Libyan-occupied part of Chad rebelled. In fact, it had been the sporadic rebellion of his followers against the outrageous colonial behavior of the Libyan occupying forces that prompted Goukouni's change of mind. In the true tradition of slave traders, they had begun rounding up Chadian women to marry them by force to the Libyan soldiers.

After several failed attempts at splitting the GUNT and imposing one Acheikh Ibn Omar of a splinter group called CDR as its new leader, the Libyans decided to move in. Starting Dec. 12, they launched several attacks aimed at wiping out the armed supporters of Goukouni, as well as ridding the region of the local Toubous population altogether. Some 2,000 members of Qaddafi's "Islamic Legion," led by Col. Ar Riffi, moved on the guerrillas, and began to systemat-

ically poison the water-wells and to kill the cattle. In the first hours of the Libyan offensive, the air force was deployed, using napalm bombs against the few desert oases. Observers have described the offensive as deliberate genocide, as it aims at destroying the very basis of the local population's survival in a desert climate.

Three weeks later, the Libyans were very close to success. There were as many as 4,000 Libyan soldiers in Chad. By Dec. 19, two thousand fresh troops were brought from Libya's southern base of Sebha into northern Chad. Libya took its time in deploying a number of its Soviet T-34s. After two Libyan Sukhoi planes were shot down on Dec. 12 and 19, it took the precaution of deploying them at high altitude while using some six MI-24 "Hind" gunship helicopters to spray poison gas.

Facing such modern weaponry are some 2,000 GUNT guerrillas, located in the cities of Bardai and Zouar. Western military support has not been as forthcoming as it should have been. On Dec. 17, two French Transall transport planes parachuted 12 tons of military materiel into the Zouar region. This precious aid included Red Eyes and Stinger ground-to-air missiles. By Dec. 22, an American commitment to deliver up to \$15 million worth of military supplies was concretized, as the first C-130 transport planes landed in Ndjamená.

Delivering materiel to northern Chad has proven difficult. Intelligence sources report that a column of the Chadian national armed forces (FANT) which had left Ndjamená on

Dec. 19 for the north, was badly hit on the way by the Libyan air force. The deployment by the Libyans of ground-to-air missiles makes a new operation of the Transall kind hazardous.

Washington and Paris especially, have to consider a more directed intervention. France's military operation in Chad is still considered "defensive," but is being forced into a more offensive posture. France's dual power between Socialist President François Mitterrand and the conservative government of Jacques Chirac has led to paralysis. Despite repeated consultations between the Chirac government and U.S. Defense Secretary Weinberger, President Mitterrand has imposed a policy of nonintervention. On Dec. 13, less than 24 hours after the beginning of the Libyan offensive, Mitterrand was telling Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that France "will not cross the 16th parallel," the unofficial border between north and south Chad.

Before his departure for his Christmas holidays on Dec. 23, Mitterrand restated this policy—an absurd policy, considering Tripoli's statements which make it clear that through Chad, Paris and Washington are Qaddafi's real targets. The goal is shared by the Soviet propaganda machine, which once again denounced the "neo-colonialist" and "imperialist aims" of the "Western powers, especially the United States" on Dec. 27. Should the status quo be maintained, Qaddafi will win. No one has any doubt that his victory will be more than a few hectares of desert land. It will be a psychological victory of prime importance. A defeat of Qaddafi could, on the contrary, reopen the way for troubles at home, and perhaps his downfall. Those are the stakes in the Tibesti desert.