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Chad War Heats Up; Government Force Routs Libyans

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Insurgents Said to Turn Against Libya

The fighting in Chad between Libyan and Chadian troops--and rebel forces allied with both sides--continued to heat up Jan. 2-9, following the sharp upsurge that began in November and December 1986. In response to apparent military setbacks on the ground, Libyan jets raided targets in southern Chad, and France responded with an air strike in the north. [See 1986 Libya Begins Chad Drive; Rebel Leader Switches Sides]

The government of President Hissene Habre in Ndjamena Jan. 3 announced that a mobile column of its troops had captured the oasis town of Fada, in northeastern Chad, after a fierce battle with the 1,000 Libyan troops garrisoned there. U.S. officials later said that Libya and its Chadian rebel allies lost several hundred dead and that the government force had captured six Italian-made attack aircraft and dozens of Soviet-built T-55 tanks.

The seizure of Fada was the first official sign that government forces had moved in strength north of the 16th parallel, which divided Chad into a northern sector controlled by Libya and pro-Libyan rebels and a southern region controlled by the French-backed Ndjamena regime. The late 1986 fighting had mostly been between Libya and its erstwhile rebel allies. Most of the insurgents turned against Libya after rebel leader Goukouni Oueddei was reportedly wounded and arrested in Tripoli.

(Another factor, cited by U.S. officials, was that the guerrillas had rebelled against Libyan efforts to "Arabize" northern Chad. The Toubou tribesmen who made up the bulk of Goukouni's forces were Moslem but not Arab. Libya continued to be aided by a small rebel faction made up ethnic Arabs.)

In addition to the victory at Fada, officials in Ndjamena claimed that government units, fighting alongside Goukouni's men, had recaptured the town of Zouar, located in the rugged Tibesti Mountains of northwestern Chad. Zouar had been reported overrun by Libyan troops in late December 1986 after heavy combat. A Chadian army communique Jan. 3 accused Libyan aircraft of dropping napalm on Zouar and Fada, "mainly aimed at the civilian population."

Libya, France Trade Air Strikes

Libyan jets Jan. 4 bombed targets below the 16th parallel for the first time since an attack on Ndjamena's airport in February 1986, according to French and Chadian officials. Four MiG-23 fighter-bombers raided the towns of Arada, Biltine and Oum Chalouba, killing one Chadian civilian and wounding four. [See 1986 Chad Fighting Renews: France, Libya Trade Bombing Attacks; Other Developments]

(Elements of the 1,200-man French "deterrent force" in Chad were based at Kalait, near Oum Chalouba, where they had reportedly set up an advance base to support the attack against Fada. The French newspaper Le Monde reported that French "military observers" were operating in the north with Chadian forces. There had been reports in 1986 of a French commando or foreign mercenary unit fighting with pro-Habre guerrillas against Libya.)

Libya continued to deny reports that it had a force of 7,000 men in Chad, backed up with tanks and jets. Libyan leader Col. Muammer el-Qaddafi, in an interview in the French left-wing daily Liberation Jan. 5, said he had sent "a few hundred soldiers" to rescue a group of Libyan technicians held captive in Chad.

The Chadian army Jan. 5 said it had shot down a Libyan MiG-23 over Fada. Meanwhile, French President Francois Mitterrand and Premier Jacques Chirac were reported to be weighing an "appropriate" reaction to the Libyan air raids. French policy called for a direct military response to Libyan attacks across the "red line" at the 16th parallel. Habre was pressuring Paris to provide air support so that his government could force Libyan troops out of Chad entirely, or at least force them to withdraw to the Aouzou strip, a uranium-rich area along Chad's northern border that Tripoli had long claimed as Libyan territory.

The retaliation came Jan. 7, when French Jaguar fighter-bombers "neutralized" Libyan radar installations at a military airstrip in Wadi Doum, in the Tibesti region, the same site that had been attacked by French planes in 1986. Hours later, in an apparent counterreprisal, Libyan warplanes were reported to have bombed a government post at Kouba Oulanga, about 40 miles (60 km) south of the red line.

French officials Jan. 8 played down the Libyan raid, suggesting that France did not want to get involved in a tit-for-tat reprisal strategy. The Libyan strike was probably a "mistake," according to Defense Minister Andre Giraud.

"It was a matter of several bombs dropping from a high altitude and falling in some dunes," he said. "It would be inappropriate to operate a system that consisted of replying each time a bomb fell in the sand."

French spokesman Denis Baudouin said: "We will continue to make graduated and firm ripostes, but we don't want an escalation."

In related developments:

- Libyan prisoners of war captured when government troops seized Fada were paraded before a frenzied anti-Libyan rally in Ndjamena Jan. 6, according to Reuters. The Libyans--many of them bandaged and bleeding from their wounds--were reportedly pelted with sticks and rocks thrown by the angry mob.
- U.S. transport planes loaded with some 30 scout jeeps and support trucks specially equipped for desert use reportedly took off Jan. 7 for Chad from Nantes, France. In December 1986, the U.S. had announced that it was sending Chad $15 million in new military aid. American officials had expressed the hope that a Libyan military defeat in Chad might prompt the Libyan armed forces to overthrow Qaddafi, whom the Reagan administration held responsible for supporting acts of subversion against neighboring African states as well as for sponsoring international terrorism. [See 1986 Libya Begins Chad Drive; Rebel Leader Switches Sides]

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