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ALGERIA: WHEN THE STATE FAILS

Violence in Algeria has reached unprecedented levels this year, with the slaughter of thousands of civilians (many of them women and children) decapitated, mutilated or burned alive in their homes. It is not sufficient, however, simply to catalogue the atrocities that have left some 80,000 people dead. Beyond the grisly statistics there is a crying need to challenge the official version of events put forward by a government that washes its hands of civilian deaths by attributing sole responsibility to "terrorist groups."

How credible is this account?

Consider, first, that most of the recent massacres have taken place in the most militarized region of the country - and often in the shadow of army barracks and security forces posts. The cries of the victims, the sounds of gunshots have been within earshot, and flames from burning houses have been visible in the distance. In some cases army units with armoured vehicles were stationed nearby, yet no one intervened to stop the massacres. How is it possible that large bands of attackers could make their way to a village, crossing main roads in highly controlled areas, carry out killings over several hours and then leave, unaccosted, on each occasion?

Secondly, most massacres have taken place in areas where a large percentage of the population had voted for the now banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), before the cancellation of the electoral process and the imposition of the state of emergency in 1992. Victims of recent massacres included FIS supporters, people who offered either active or passive support to armed "Islamist" groups, and individuals who had refused to join state-armed militias. Some of the massacres have allegedly been committed by groups acting on the instructions, or with the consent, of certain army and security forces units. Is it not possible that through the massacres, the government is physically seeking to "eradicate" the Islamists it has vowed to destroy politically?

Thirdly, it may not be economic accident that the recent massacres have clustered around the Mitidja plateau near Algiers. This is the most fertile region of Algeria: its 500, 000 acres were once the jewel of French colonial agriculture. After independence, the land was nationalized and later farmers acquired the right to its permanent use. Recent efforts to privatize this land have sparked intense debate, and some fear that much of this rich land may finally wind up in the hands of powerful interest groups. Who stands to gain from massacres which have forced villagers and peasants to flee from the area?

These questions implicitly challenge the simplistic explanation - offered by Algerian officials to the international community - that the atrocities owe their sole origins to a conflict between a government that would protect "democracy" and "terrorist groups" seeking to establish an "Islamic" regime.

Unquestionably, armed groups calling themselves "Islamic" have committed the worst atrocities in the name of "holy war." But likewise, terrible abuses have been committed by those who claim to defend "democracy" and the rule of law.

Civilians have been the primary victims of the Algerian massacres, abandoned to their fate by a state that claims it cannot provide protection. Yet, oddly, when these civilians are required to legitimize new "democratic" procedures, their protection can be assured. Thus did the state manage to provide adequate security during presidential, legislative and local elections in 1995 and 1997. And security is guaranteed at all times in the lucrative "exclusion zones" dotted with oil and gas wells, refineries and pipelines. When Algerian authorities claim that the security situation is "under control" they mean it. Oil and gas flow, in absolute security. Foreign companies are well protected by the security forces. The state's reserves of foreign currency have reached unprecedented levels, and the IMF and World Bank have nodded approvingly at Algeria's economic liberalization policies.

Ironically, and tragically, Algerian authorities may be able to accommodate themselves to the current level of violence, and perhaps even benefit from it. But this is not the case for ordinary Algerians, increasingly impoverished, living in constant fear of death and denied the protection of the state. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed. Torture, "disappearances", abductions and death threats by security forces, state-armed militias and armed "Islamist" groups have become a daily routine.

The Algerian state has abysmally failed in its duty to protect the civilian population. The international community must not continue to look away. Human rights protection is not just an "internal affair," least of all when children are slaughtered next to army barracks. An international investigation must be established to uncover the truth. We owe it to the victims of the Algerian crisis.

