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Simple tale of a crisis

Remember back in 1983 when the Chad crisis threatened to ignite World War III? So whatever happened to this fly-blown piece of the Sahara that Ronald Reagan called "vital to the free world?" Sometimes it's illuminating to review yesterday's crises. Just follow this simple story.

Hissene Habre used to fight the French. But now he is France's ally and holds the bullet-riddled capital, Ndjamen. His forces are armed by the CIA, Israel, France, Egypt and the Sudan. According to Washington, Habre is a "freedom fighter," even though his troops have recently been charged with torture and nastiness exceptional even for Chad.

North of the capital lurk the forces of Goukouni Oueddi (rhymes with Bofooni Mooweddeye). Based at the oasis of Faya-Largeau, this bunch of desert ruffians are called the GUNT (Transitional Government of National Union) forces. Now Goukouni — my favorite because I like his name — used to be head of Chad but was overthrown in a coup by his ex-pal Habre.

The French, who ran Chad, supported Goukouni against Habre but then backed Habre against Goukouni. So Goukouni got mad and turned to his neighbors, the Libyans. Up popped that nemesis of all clean-living people, the nefarious Col. Moammar Khadafy. Khadafy used to support Habre but now turned to Goukouni and the GUNT.

Clear so far? Habre's ally, Col. Kamaougue (rhymes with boogie-woogie), turned against him: Southern Chad joined the Goukouni group. Libyan arms and troops poured south. Washington and Paris reacted with horror at the thought of their arch-foe, Khadafy, taking over Chad — even though everyone admitted that Chad was more of a liability than an asset.

The U.S. sent its navy to harass Libya's coast and attempt to provoke the Libyans into an attack. In came planeloads of tough French paratroopers. Meanwhile, Washington got its African ally, Zaire, to send a few thousand troops to help Habre. This was done by means of a cashier's cheque for \$25 million U.S., given personally to Zaire's Maximum Leader, President Mobutu Sese Seko, the world's richest man.

The ragtag Zairean troops were armed and advised by the Israelis. What were they doing in the middle of Africa with a bunch of wildmen called the Zairean armed forces? Why, sticking their fingers into Khadafy's eye. Libya had been a sharp thorn in Israel's side so now Jerusalem was paying back the Libyans in kind.

Helping this effort were the Egyptians and Sudanese, both sworn enemies of Khadafy. They were helping Habre to get back at Libya for arming Christian rebels in south Sudan — who had until a short time before been armed by the Israelis. Clear? Add in a few South Yemeni and Ethiopian agents, helping Oueddi because they opposed Sudan.

Just as this bouillabaisse of intrigue threatened to go critical, France's President Francois Mitterrand announced that he had made a secret deal with Khadafy. French and Libyan forces would be withdrawn from Chad. The French packed up and left for neighboring African countries. But to Mitterrand's enormous consternation, the Libyans, it seemed, stayed put.

Mitterrand's allies, the U.S., leaked the story that Libya had not withdrawn. The CIA was not happy about the deal and wanted to wreck it. In this effort, the CIA was joined by French intelligence which, being right wing, hates Mitterrand. Mitterrand was mortified and France was made to look silly.

Were the Libyans still in Chad? Well, maybe. Some years ago, Libya annexed a section of northern Chad called the Azou Strip. The former Ottoman rulers of the area, it seemed, gave this mineral-rich area to Libya. But then Italy, which seized Libya from Turkey, made a deal with France, which ruled Chad, and gave back Azou to Chad. So here were the Libyans, sitting in the Azou which they said was part of their great motherland, while nearly everyone else said they were still occupying Chad.

Enter the Nigerians. Last year, Nigeria, the most powerful black African nation, backed Habre. Then came the military coup of Maj.-Gen. Mohammed Buhari and Nigerian support switched to Goukouni and the GUNT. There have been skirmishes between Habre and Nigerian troops around Lake Chad. Now Nigeria is reportedly supplying arms to Kamougue who, readers will surely recall, is allied to Goukouni.

Morocco, a warm ally of the U.S., was backing Habre. But then, to everyone's surprise, King Hassan announced a union of some sort between Morocco and Libya, of all places. In a trice, Washington's closest North African ally was in bed with — gasp — the hated Libyans. Morocco then threw its support to Goukouni.

Why? Because Libya had been supporting Polisario Front rebels fighting Moroccan troops in the disputed Western Sahara. Abruptly, Libya ditched its Polisario clients and backed Morocco. Morocco then ditched Habre and backed the GUNT — to Washington's enormous chagrin. Some claimed that France arranged the deal to get back at Washington for stabbing it in the back over Chad.

The Algerians, main backers of the Polisario, were furious at their erstwhile Libyan allies for abandoning the Saharan rebels and for making a sweetheart deal with Morocco, Algeria's enemy. Algeria may now help Habre to counteract Moroccan aid for Goukouni. Meanwhile, at least half Chad's wretched people are near starvation.

I just cannot grasp why people don't understand the situation in Chad. It seems so clear.