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The scorecard on Chad's war

It's half-time in Chad's nasty little war. Three thousand crack French paratroopers are dug in on a defensive line across central Chad, defending their ally, Hissene Habre. Facing them are 2,500 Libyan soldiers and 3,000 fighters of former Chadian President Goukouni Weddeye. One-hundred-and-twenty-degree heat and army flies are now the main enemies of both sides.

None of the many players in this drama really want Chad — except for the unfortunate Chadians themselves who have been fighting each other for the last 18 years. But no one wants to see their enemies gain control of what has been aptly described as Africa's most worthless piece of real estate. Here is the latest scorecard:

Libya — Score 5 for Col. Khadafy. He has called America's bluff and once again humiliated the United States. Undaunted by U.S. military aircraft and a carrier battle group on his borders, the Libyan leader went ahead and gave decisive support to his faction in the Chadian civil war. This support has allowed Goukouni Weddeye to successfully recover half of Chad. Col. Khadafy has also realized his goal of neutralizing the hostile Habre regime, supported by the U.S., France, Egypt and Sudan. Libya's southern border is safe, at least for the time being.

The United States — Score 0. Once again, the world's most powerful nation has been made to look foolish by its bete noire, Col. Khadafy. Goaded into an almost thoughtless rage by incessant Libyan harassment, the Americans plunged into the Chad civil war, hoping to find a pretext to attack Libya's air and naval bases. But the wily Libyan ignored all American provocations and left the U.S. looking like a paper tiger or an international bully who has just gotten sand kicked into its face.

French troops to stay?

France — Score 1. Unwilling to see its client, Habre, overthrown by Weddeye, the French reluctantly sent troops to Chad and may now be forced to maintain them there for an indefinite period. The French socialists, who sharply denounced their nation's former interventionist policies in West Africa, are now back in the colonial Beau Geste business. The French are also furious at Washington over what they see as its heavy handed, obtuse actions in Chad. According to senior French officials, Washington is trying to get France to do its dirty work in Chad. But, at least, the French have proven effective and resolute.

Zaire — Score 2 for cash. President Mobutu, regarded as one of the world's most corrupt and venal leaders, has sent 2,000 troops, supported by some Israeli advisers, to prop up the Habre regime. This gesture earned him a tip of \$50 million from the Reagan administration; money that will likely find its way directly into Mobutu's legendary Swiss bank accounts, now said to total over \$1.2 billion.

Egypt — Score 0. Formerly a strong supporter of Habre, Egypt worked closely with the CIA and Sudan to help him overthrow the former legitimate Weddeye government in Chad. But heavy American pressure on Cairo to send troops to Chad has caused bad blood between the two allies and it is clear that Egypt is seeking to distance itself from the American vendetta against Khadafy. The presence of 5,000 American troops on manoeuvres in Egypt has caused Cairo some embarrassment and lent substance to Khadafy's charges that Egypt is a cat's paw of Washington.

Sudan — Score 0. Its leader, Gen. Numieri, is a bitter foe of Khadafy and is helping the Habre forces. But Sudan is beset by a growing revolt in its own south that bears many similarities to the struggle in Chad. Sudan cannot feed itself and can hardly afford to continue supporting anti-Libyan forces in Chad.

Russia — Score 3. Normally a major player in such dramas, the Soviets have stayed completely out of this crisis, content to make significant propaganda points by portraying the U.S. as a dangerous imperialist bully.

Tit-for-tat reaction

The general African reaction to the imbroglio in Chad is summed up by one diplomat: "If the U.S. can support the contras in Nicaragua against the government, why can't Khadafy back Weddeye, who was, after all, the legitimate ruler of Chad before he was overthrown by the CIA?"

The French are now trying to negotiate a settlement with Libya: Secret talks are going on in Tripoli, West Africa and Geneva. But the Americans, who contributed so much to creating this latest crisis, have refused to consider any negotiations with the Libyans. This refusal to talk has convinced many Africans that the U.S. is intent only on settling its grudge against Libya, regardless of the unfortunate consequences to the beleaguered Chadians or to America's allies.

So, at half-time, Washington has nothing to show except more embarrassment and chagrin. Col. Khadafy, who loves the limelight, is probably revelling in his new role as the man who faced down the United States. His latest coup will only serve to make Khadafy even more appealing to the growing anti-American forces in Africa and the Middle East.

It is truly ironical that in trying to overthrow its favorite enemy, the Reagan administration has succeeded only in giving Col. Khadafy's career a major new boost. Equally unsettling, Washington has demonstrated a disturbing amount of strategic and diplomatic blundering that calls into question the foreign policy competence of the administration.

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