

Where war never ends

Bismarck, describing an impossibly complex dynastic dispute with Denmark, said, "there were only three people who understood this mess: One is dead, one went mad thinking about it; I'm the third, and I have forgotten the details." The same might well be said for Chad, Africa's latest hot spot.

Among the impoverished, benighted nations of sub-Saharan Africa, Chad is by far the most wretched. Its 4.5 million inhabitants, almost equally divided between northern Muslims and southern blacks, worshipers of trees and rocks, barely subsist off the arid land. In a country almost as large as France and Spain combined, there are only 150 miles of paved roads. So remote and desolate is Chad, that parts of this little-known country have never even been mapped.

Though the French granted nominal independence to Chad in 1960, they maintained troops there for 20 more years in order to prop up friendly regimes and protect them from a series of growing factional clashes that threatened to ignite a major civil war. In 1980 the French pulled their troops out of Chad, leaving behind a shaky coalition government of three principal factions: That of GUNT, led by President Goukouni Oueddi; FAT, representing the southerners and led by Col. Kamougue; and a group headed by Hissan Habre.

These three inimical factions began at once to fight, reducing the ramshackle capital, N'Djamena, to a bullet-riddled wreck. Chad, a nation with over 100 different languages and dialects, rapidly disintegrated into tribal chaos. Col. Kamougue called on Libya for help but was turned down. Then Goukouni Oueddi, heading the recognized government, sought Libyan aid under the auspices of the Organization for African Unity. Libya's Col. Moammar Khadafy obliged by sending a few-thousand troops into neighboring Chad and these forces managed to defeat the opposing rebel forces.

But President Oueddi soon tired of his unpredictable Libyan allies and asked them to leave, which, to everyone's surprise, they promptly did. The Habre forces, which had been licking their wounds, received arms and support from Egypt's Anwar Sadat and the Sudan's Gen. Nimeire, both bitter enemies of Col. Khadafy. Habre marched on N'Djamena and forced Oueddi to flee to the north. The south, meanwhile, became a virtually autonomous entity.

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Now, according to the U.S. State Department, the Oueddi forces are preparing for a comeback, allegedly supported by the Libyan air force and some vaguely identified "mercenary units." All of these goings-on would seem, on the surface, to be of absolutely no importance whatsoever except to the unfortunate inhabitants of Chad who are in their 18th year of civil war. Yet, as in many other troubled areas of Africa, foreign powers have become involved in these tribal struggles.

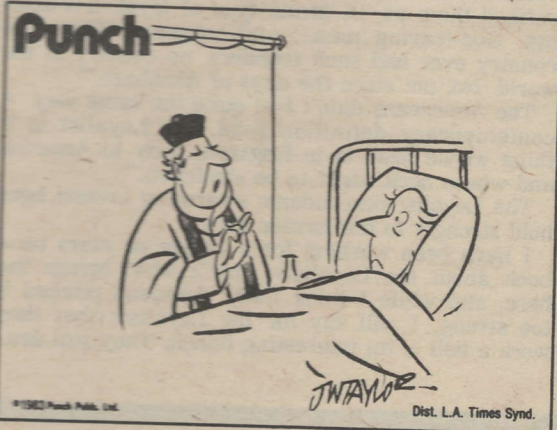
Libya appears to be providing aid again to the Oueddi faction; Egypt and Sudan, eager to cause trouble for Col. Khadafy who has so long bedeviled them, are openly arming and supporting Hissan Habre. Recently there have been border clashes between the Habre forces and Nigerian troops, the cause of which is lost in profound obscurity. Although Chad is of absolutely no importance to anyone, its neighbors seem to be heading toward a potentially serious clash.

The latest entrants into the Chad imbroglio are the United States, a close ally of Egypt and the Sudan, and France. The U.S. government has been particularly vocal in expressing its "deep concern" over Libyan involvement in Chad, no doubt part of its campaign to clip the wings of the Libyan strongman who has, in turn, gone out of his way to irritate and harass the Americans. France, a backer of the Habre faction, has just threatened to intervene if Libyan forces enter Chad.

Though the Libyans deny planning to again intervene in Chad, there is a good possibility that they will at some point clash with the Egyptian-Sudanese-French-supported Habre faction: The inevitable result of such a growing conflict will see Cairo and Khartoum calling for American armed support against Libya. The Libyans, already beset by a host of enemies of their own creation, may well call on their friend and ally, the Soviet Union, for assistance, thereby creating a genuine crisis that could also involve Nigeria, Algeria and possibly even Ethiopia, an enemy of the Sudan.

This is very real: In Mauritania the Moroccans are fighting the Polisario; in the horn of Africa, the Ethiopians are battling the Somalis and rebels in Eritrea and Tigre. A war in Chad would complete an arc of conflict stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, plunging central and northern Africa into a series of expanding national and tribal conflicts whose outcome would be impossible to predict. If the pattern of recent African history is any guide, the nation most likely to benefit from such instability would be the Soviet Union, ready, as ever, to provide arms or even Cuban mercenary troops in order to expand its already growing influence in Africa.

(Eric Margolis, a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, writes frequently on international affairs)



"Just tell Peter that Dougie sent you."