



## BOMBINGS RENEW FEAR OF WAR IN ALGERIA

April 16, 2007

*Recent suicide bombings in the North African country of Algeria have security experts worrying that Islamic terrorism is returning to a nation still recovering from a long civil war.*

Last week, bombers killed 33 people and wounded several hundred more in three separate suicide attacks in Algiers, the capital.

The first in the coordinated attacks targeted the office of the country's prime minister, who survived the blast. The other two attacks took place at a suburban police station.

An Algerian insurgent group that changed its name in January from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) to al-Qaida Organization in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility for the attacks in Internet postings.

The group had been part of a bloody civil war against the country's secular government in the 1990s that killed over 200,000 people.

The recent bombings reminded the people there that the Islamic insurgency was still active.

"We had forgotten what happened," Hamoud Ouachad, 33, told the Washington Post. "And now it's starting over. ... We want peace. We don't want this to become a daily occurrence."

### **Civil war**

The civil war erupted after an Islamist political party was denied victory in a 1992 election. The vote was annulled by the country's secular government, with the backing of the military, but supporters of the Islamic party went underground and began fighting the government.

The insurgency began a campaign of violence that included bombings, assassinations and massacres by both the Islamic radicals and government forces, according to human rights groups.

Fighting continued until 1999 when the country's then and current President Abdelaziz Bouteflika released thousands of rebels from prison and offered amnesty to armed militants.

Nearly 85 percent of the fighters supported the amnesty measures, and violence dropped markedly in Algeria in the early 2000s. Sporadic attacks continued in remote parts of the country, but the nation was relatively calm, although in late 2006 the GSPC attacked two police

stations and in December gunmen attacked buses carrying employees of oil company Brown & Root Candor.

### **Upsetting the political balance**

But last week's attacks are the most severe since 2002 and have regional experts worrying that they will upset the delicate balance of power between the military and the civilian government.

"Politically I think the greatest danger is that this is going to set back the process of transformation and reforming the country," analyst Marina Ottaway of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace told Voice of America.

"President Bouteflika has made considerable progress in the last few years in wresting power from the military and putting it back in the hands of the civilian government. Of course, any return to terrorism, essentially, and to violence, is going to enhance the role of the military again."

Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem announced after the attacks that legislative elections scheduled for May 17 would proceed.

"Such criminal acts are meant to plunge Algeria back into the crisis years," Belkhadem said, the Washington Post reported.

### **Independence from France**

Algerians have a history of using violence to accomplish political gains, including during its bloody fight to gain independence from France.

Algeria had been a "department" of France since it conquered the country from the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1830.

But by 1954 the struggle for independence from colonial rule began under the leadership of the guerrilla group, National Liberation Front (FLN), who justified the use of violence to gain political independence.

The group used tactics that included killing civilian Algerians of European descent, colons, in Algeria as well as Arab or Berber Algerians who opposed their nationalistic gains.

The violence spread to France in the so called "café wars," which targeted Algerian expatriates of rival nationalist groups as well as civilians. An estimated 5,000 were killed in these attacks.

The French were not free from indiscriminate violence during the Algerian War for Independence. Random violence against Algerians was tolerated and the Parisian police were implicated in the famous Oct. 17, 1961 massacre in which unarmed Algerian protesters were attacked and up to 200 killed in Paris.

And colons were not immune from terrorist violence, against both Algerians and French police and military, who they perceived as abandoning them in their struggle to remain part of France.

It is estimated that between 700,000 and 1 million people died in the struggle for independence, which ended with France declaring Algeria an independent nation on July 3, 1962.

That history of violence and its ties to political developments, according to regional experts, continues to influence groups like the GSPC, which hopes to push the country to implement a more religion-based government.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

© 2007 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions