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Algeria Struggles With 'Squatters'

By ROBERT LEE

Special to the Minneapolis Tribune

ALGIERS, Algeria — The Algerian government is making a new, intensive effort to collect rent from the squatter-occupants of some 120,000 apartments and villas vacated by Europeans during the revolution.

Previous efforts to persuade all the squatters to pay their rent have been of little avail. Only half the occupants of the dwellings declared "vacant" and therefore nationalized have registered with the prefecture in Algiers. And not all of these, it is freely admitted, are paying their rent.

THIS LACK of revenue from properties on which European owners once paid sizable taxes rankles deep with a government that has no hope of making revenues meet even an austerity budget this year.

But the problem must be attacked with delicacy, for the improvement in living conditions for Algerians who moved in when Europeans—mostly Frenchmen—moved out was one of the most important gains of the revolution. To put in the street everyone who doesn't pay his rent could create considerable discontent.

Thus, the question of rents was hardly mentioned last week when 66 census takers were sent out to interview every tenant and home owner in the city.

THE OBJECT was to find out how many squatters there were, how long they had been there and how good were the living quarters.

"All I know is that there are too many people living in the 'vacant' houses," said one housing official as he edged his way through lines of unhappy tenants waiting to see his boss.

This over-crowding creates a health problem that is compounded by the failure of either the tenants or the state to make building repairs.

"**I THINK** most of the people in our building pay their rent," said one tenant of a state-owned apartment house. "But a sewer pipe in the basement is starting to leak, and I don't know who is going to do anything about it."

But probably a majority of the squatters can't afford either to repair their homes or pay their rent. It is estimated that one-half to two-thirds of the country's potential labor force is either unemployed or underemployed.

Furthermore, the people with the ability to pay are not always housed in the best apartments. And there is no incentive for readjustment, because rents on well-kept apartments in poor buildings are often higher than rents on poorly kept homes in first-rate buildings.

THE CENSUS is designed to show for the first time the full extent of these problems. The big question, however, is what the government will do once the facts are in.

It has already announced that unauthorized persons who have moved into state-owned apartments since June 19, the day Ahmed Ben Bella was ousted from the presidency, will face "eviction and judicial action."

As for unauthorized occupancies of longer standing, they will "in general" be "regularized" — whatever that means.

It probably means the government hasn't decided how tough to be with squatters whose tenure dates from the revolutionary period.

ROBERT LEE is a Minneapolis Tribune staff writer who is on leave traveling on a William P. Gray foreign correspondent fellowship.

REPORT FROM FRANCE

Was Ben Bella Victim Of His Own System?

A BOOK REVIEW of "Ahmed Ben Bella" by Robert Merle, Gallimard, Paris, 184 pp, \$1.80.

BY ROBERT D. LEE

Aix-en Provence, France
Ahmed Ben Bella spent nine years in hiding and six years in prison. Now, after less than three years as president of the Algerian Republic, he is gone, perhaps dead, as mysteriously as he lived.

Ben Bella's fate remains unexplained, but the mystery of his life has been largely dispensed by a tiny biography, or rather autobiography, published in France.

It is biography because author Robert Merle, whose novel "Weekend at Zuydcoote" won the Goncourt prize (France's most important literary prize) in 1949, has given the story order and style.

But the style Merle has chosen is autobiography. He writes in the first person and claims complete fidelity to a series of tape-recorded conversations with Ben Bella in the spring of 1964.

One must admit the style seems to fit the subject, a man of action. It is quick, terse, modest, little invaded by reflective digression.

When Ben Bella sets forth his political views, they seem more instinctual than reasoned. There is no account, for instance, of how he came to a socialist viewpoint, or of why he chose armed rebellion.

"I felt the choice had been made for me," he says quite simply. "The repression at Setif (which quelled a 1945 uprising and killed 40,000 Algerians) had cut an unbridgeable gap between the two communities (European and Algerian). I owed myself to mine."

Instinct likewise guided his choice of men. Fighting with Moroccan troops in Italy in World War II, he decided good leaders were those who were brave in battle. Thus, he came

to admire both John Kennedy and Fidel Castro—a fact that many Americans took for hypocrisy.

On his meeting with Kennedy in 1962, Ben Bella says: "He impressed me as being an honest and courageous man. But he appeared to be subjected to innumerable pressures, to be very much the prisoner of a system."

Ben Bella believed no single political or economic system was directly relevant to the problems facing independent Algeria. As president, he outlawed the Communist party.

The only system he put faith in was "autogestion" — the scheme he himself developed for self-management by the workers of nationalized lands and companies. But "autogestion" foundered and gave rise to some of the disillusionment that preceded Ben Bella's fall from power. He was, perhaps, a victim of his own system.

De Gaulle Vote Loss Worries Algerians

12-12-65

By ROBERT LEE

Special to the Minneapolis Tribune

ALGIERS, Algeria — The failure of Charles de Gaulle to be re-elected president of France on the first ballot has left Algerians shocked and worried.

It was widely assumed in Algeria that De Gaulle would get an absolute majority of votes cast and win a second seven-year term without the run-off election now scheduled for next Sunday.

TO ALGERIANS, De Gaulle is first and foremost the man who ended an eight-year war and set them free. It is feared in spite of assurances of the opposition, that his defeat might end the era of good will that has developed between France and its former colony.

A source close to the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said last week, after the results of the first-round balloting were known:

"Of course, we will work on a government-to-government basis with whomever is elected. But we regret for Gen. De Gaulle personally that he was not re-elected on the first ballot."

The Algerian government took discrete but partisan stand in the final days before Frenchmen went to the polls.

THE OFFICIAL and only Algerian newspaper, El Moudjahid, analyzed fairly, in a series of six articles, the positions and background of the six candidates for the French presidency.

But, in the final article, the newspaper pointed out that, "in the short run, Gen. De Gaulle remains the most

solid guarantee of Franco-Algerian co-operation."

"Algeria should probably, because of her own (socialist) preferences, feel ideologically closer to the French left," the paper said. "But how can one close his eyes to the past of these pretended defenders of democracy who have always allied themselves with rightists to fight emancipation movements among colonial peoples, even if they are today saying the opposite."

ACTUALLY, of the candidates opposing De Gaulle in the first round, only one—Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour—advocated a reduction of economic aid to Algeria.

That aid amounts to about \$140 million this year, including \$50 million for the support of 80,000 French teachers and technicians in Algeria.

Furthermore, the French, under agreements signed last summer, have agreed to buy Algerian crude oil at prices considerably above the world market. These purchases, along with the economic aid program and sales of Algerian wines in France, will permit Algiers merchants to keep their shelves lined with French goods.

Thus, thanks to habits developed during the colonial period and to Gaullist policy, the Algerian economy remains closely linked to that of France. The feeling in Algiers is that as De Gaulle goes, so go the two nations.

ROBERT LEE is a Minneapolis Tribune staff writer on leave under a William P. Gray foreign correspondent's fellowship.

Doubting Iowan Learns About Algiers Himself

By ROBERT D. LEE

ALGIERS, Algeria — As the S. S. City of Tunis ploughed its way through the choppy Mediterranean toward Algiers, an Algerian, a Frenchman and an American nibbled at lunch in the tourist class dining room.

"You've never been to Algiers?" the Algerian asked the American. "It's a beautiful city, built on those hills. . . . It's really a beautiful city."

"I'll bet," said the American to himself. "After all, Algeria is a desert, a desert that underwent a revolution that ended only a little more than three years ago."

"It is a beautiful city," said the Frenchman, who had done military service in Algeria. He seemed to sense the American's unspoken doubts.

"Is that right," replied the American, thinking that perhaps they meant Algiers was beautiful by comparison with other African cities, but. . . .

And then the boat slipped between haze-hidden hills into the horseshoe that is the port of Algiers. Baggage was lugged ashore, passports checked, money changed, and the Algerian, joined at the dock by his cousin, set out to show the Frenchman and the American his town.

He took them past long rows of 19th century French buildings, solid stone buildings housing stores that display the latest in French fashions in bright windows. He took them through streets crowded with Algerians in neat European-cut suits—accompanied by women in veils.

"I get the impression all the women are beautiful," said the American. "Their eyes certainly are."

"But when you see the whole face, you are often disappointed," the Algerians assured him.

The four stood in front of the city's Great Mosque, built in the 17th century.

"When the French came to Algeria in the 1830's they converted it to a cathedral," noted the first Algerian, whom the Frenchman had mistaken from a compatriot during the voyage across the Mediterranean. He was that well groomed, his French that impeccable.

Added his cousin, with a pronounced Arabic accent: "And the Cathedral was the first thing in the city to fall during the revolution. The people themselves took this square."

The foursome wandered along a tree-lined boulevard that could just as well be in Paris, into a huge open square where children sat in groups chatting and singing, then down 100 or so stairs toward the sea.

"You get pretty used to climbing stairs in this city," said the second Algerian. "When I was in Paris I asked a friend of mine to go up the Eiffel Tower with me—on foot. He thought I was joking."

He led his friends under the awnings of a deserted open market until they emerged at the seashore once again.

There lay the City of Tunis beside her dock, seeming considerably bigger than she had during the tempestuous trip from Marseille. But now, with the sun already down, the city's horseshoe was outlined not by white buildings but tiers of sparkling lights, all reflected in the bay.

"It's a beautiful city," said the American.

Conference a Flop, Site Up for Rent

1-30-62

By ROBERT LEE

ALGIERS, Algeria—The Algerian government is trying to convert the physical remnants of a political fiasco into an asset for its tourist industry.

Tourist Minister Abdela-ziz Maaoui has put out feelers to European-based companies and tourist agencies to see if they might be interested in renting a block of 2,000 accommodations on the Algerian seacoast this summer.

The accommodations, known collectively as the Club des Pins, were built at an approximate cost of \$24 million for the Afro-Asian Conference of 1965.

THEY INCLUDE 65 elegant, ranch-style villas perched on small hills overlooking the Mediterranean 15 miles west of Algiers. These were to house visiting heads of state.

There are also a domed conference hall, a huge restaurant, a night club, small apartment buildings to house 1,000 members of visiting parties and space for another 1,000 persons in the evacuated village of Moretti nearby.

A sign at one entrance still points the way to the Afro-Asian Conference, but a line of flag poles splitting the main boulevard approach is bare. All roads lead to steel gates and policemen.

Former President Ahmed Ben Bella had hoped those roads would lead Algeria to glory.

IN PLANNING the conference, he first commissioned Egyptian architects to build a 30-floor, 600-room hotel overlooking the city and bay of Algiers. The project had to be abandoned with only five floors complete when the hotel began to slip down the hillside on which it was being built.

It was then that Ben Bella turned to the idea of building a conference complex around a small night club formerly owned by a Frenchman, the Club des Pins.

After Ben Bella was ousted from power last June 19, the conference was postponed from July to November. And in November, boycotted by Communist China, it was adjourned after only a meeting of foreign ministers.

The new Algerian government, headed by Col. Houari Boumediene, has not deplored publicly what it regards as one of Ben Bella's ventures into reality. Instead, it has decided to make the best of the situation.

ACCORDING TO Maaoui, that includes getting someone besides the government to manage the Club des Pins.

A price of \$100 a bed (or about \$200,000) for all accommodations except the 65 most fancy villas and the central meeting facilities has been suggested in official circles.

But Maaoui recently denied this was the asking price. The question of price remains open, he said.

If the club is leased to foreigners, it would be a shot in the arm for Algeria's lagging tourist industry.

The country attracted only 100,000 foreigners in 1964, of whom 63,000 were Frenchmen and 1,500 Americans.

A SPOKESMAN for the Algerian Tourist Agency said the pace had picked up this year. Hotels at southern oases are solidly booked from now through May, he said.

But it is an easily verifiable fact that the vast majority of Algerian hotels, including all but the very best in Algiers, are virtually empty most of the time. Many of their best clients, the French settlers have left the country and tourists have not yet begun to pick up the slack.

The foreigners who may come to the Club des Pins, will not, of course, help solve that problem, but the foreign currencies they bring into Algeria would be most welcome.

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