

# French and Algerian Presidents to meet

by Christine Pierre

As the wave of terrorist bombings continues in Paris, President Jacques Chirac has come under fire for his decision to meet with Algerian President Liamine Zéroual, during the U.N. 50th anniversary celebrations in New York at the end of this month. Both opposition figures and the majority in Chirac's camp oppose the meeting, convinced that the bombers are Algerian Islamic extremists attempting to take power, and view it as the cause of increased terrorist attacks against the country.

Chirac's decision came as a surprise to all and does represent a shift in French policy. Under the government of Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, France kept Algerian affairs and the civil war at arms length, aside from contacts maintained by then-Interior Minister Charles Pasqua with representatives of the Algerian junta. During this period, the French government stance toward the Algerian government was dominated by two opposing sides: Pasqua, on the one side, wanted to give full backing to the Algerian government against the Muslims, versus then-Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, who favored opening up a peace dialogue between all parties including the Algerian opposition group, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Juppé, now prime minister, had even made encouraging statements regarding the peace negotiations that had brought together the FIS, and the non-religious opposition to the present government, the FLN and the FFS, under the auspices of the Vatican-linked St. Egidio Community in Rome.

In any case, until now, the French government had rejected any official meeting with Algeria's President, so as not to legitimize the Algerian military, which annulled the 1991 legislative elections and banned the winning party, the FIS, to prevent it from taking power. An aggravating element is the fact that Chirac and Zéroual will meet just prior to the Algerian presidential elections, which are considered a charade, since the majority party, the FIS, is still banned and has been excluded from participating.

## Many questions, much speculation

Jacques Chirac, however, is not Pasqua and will not tolerate the brutality of the Algerian regime. In a recent interview given from Madrid, where he was meeting with President Felipe González, Chirac indicated that he will pressure Zéroual to both open up a peace dialogue with all the parties who oppose war, and to organize legislative

elections which will not exclude the FIS, a step viewed by Chirac as "essential" after the presidential elections, which constitute only a "first step" toward reestablishing legitimate authority.

What is not clear, is how Chirac will obtain such changes from an Algerian government whose brutality seems, in fact, to be growing endlessly. Will Paris use its foreign aid, some FF 5-6 billion, to impose moderation on the tyrants? Is Chirac willing to meet with the opposition leaders, especially the FIS, up to now only received quietly at the back door?

There is also much speculation as to what reasons prompted Chirac's decision: Was it an attempt to appease the Algerian government, suspected of manipulating the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) terrorists? As Interior Minister Jean Louis Debré had unofficially told the *Nouvelle République du Centre Ouest*, and as most of the French intelligence services know, the Algerian military security has massively infiltrated the GIA in order to discredit the Islamic cause, by manipulating the GIA to commit hideous crimes. Is the threat of destabilization to France such that Chirac allowed himself to be blackmailed by the Algerian government, while, in a similar situation in Bosnia, he had refused to be blackmailed by the Bosnian Serbs? Or, has Jacques Chirac concluded that Islamic networks, including the FIS, are responsible for the bombings in France and that full support has to be given to the Algerian government "eradicators," who seek to eradicate all Islamists? Other rumors have it that Chirac decided to support the Algerian government because French intelligence estimates that the government could win the civil war, reversing all previous analyses that it was a no-win situation.

Whatever his reasons, the renewed bombings against France in the aftermath of that decision, show again that appeasement only excites the enemy to greater efforts.

## The 'afghansi' track

In any case, any policy which attempts to narrow this to being a purely Algerian problem is likely to fail. According to an article by George Brock in the London *Times* of Oct. 18, the French secret services are presently investigating the international networks of Islamic fighters ("afghansi") in the 1979-89 Afghanistan War. This track would be a most fruitful one, especially if French authorities scrutinize the brains behind that network: the British intelligence services and their allies such as George Bush in the United States which set them up to start with. By turning their attention in that direction, French authorities will be able to establish coherence between all the recent attacks against the French nation: the campaign against the nuclear tests run by Greenpeace, accelerated by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Britain's Pugwash darling Joseph Rotblat, the financial attacks emanating from the "London gnomes," and the terrorist bombings carried out by instruments such as the Afghan networks of international terrorism.