

CHAD/LIBYA/
U.S./FRANCE

JENNINGS: Good evening. The war in Chad raises many questions, some long-range and some short. Does it matter who wins? How, if at all, will American interests be affected in north Central Africa? And what will a victory for the rebels, if it happens, mean for their principal supporter, Libya's Col. Khadafy? Tonight, the immediate question centers on the northern oasis town of Faya-Largeau. That's the principal scene of the fighting today between the government and the rebels. Has it fallen? No one is absolutely sure, though reports from Chad's capital tonight suggest its immediate future may be hanging in the balance. We begin our report on this former French colony, overseas with ABC's Pierre Salinger in Paris.

SALINGER: Rebel forces headed by former Chadian President Goukouni Oueddei, supported by Libyan troops, tanks and aircraft opened a massive attack this morning on the strategic oasis of Faya-Largeau in the north of Chad. There is growing fear in defense and diplomatic circles here that the military situation in Chad is deteriorating rapidly, posing a serious threat to the future of the French and American-backed government of President Hissene Habre. Some 2,500 of Habre's best troops have been surrounded in Faya-Largeau for a week. Goukouni's representative in Paris, Abduron Mussa, claimed Faya-Largeau had fallen into the hands of the rebels. In the capital, N'Djamena, the Chadian information minister conceded Habre's troops were in serious trouble and said the attack had been beaten back after three hours of hard fighting. Thus the fate of Faya-Largeau remains in question. What is confirmed is that Libya is deeply involved in the conflict. ABC News has learned from a former mercenary pilot who worked for the Libyans that other mercenary pilots, many of them recruited by the former CIA agent Rowan Wilson, have been flying up to six flights a day in C-130 hercules transports from Sabha, in Libya, to Faya-Largeau, transporting troops and arms. We were told they've also been flying in shipments of a small Italian fighter plane to provide air cover for advancing ground troops. French paratroopers, who have been stationed in the Central Africa Republic, were ordered into the Chad capital, N'Djamena, last night. The first contingence arrived today. And French government sources said a total of 500 paratroopers are being dispatched to Chad as training instructors to shore up the Chadian army. A number of American advisers, seen here in civilian clothes, are already in Chad to instruct the army in the use of Red-Eye missiles sent by the Reagan administration. If Faya-Largeau has really fallen, and with it 2,500 of Habre's best troops--reportedly 85% of his army. It will be a heavy blow to Habre and his French and American supporters. It will open the road to the Libyan-backed rebels to re-establish domination over Chad. Pierre Salinger, ABC News, Paris.

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JENNINGS: Well, two more questions: What will the French, or what will the United States do to prevent the rebels from taking over northern Chad and then perhaps advancing south to Chad's capital of N'Djamena? Here's our senior correspondent John Scali.

SCALI: Top U.S. intelligence is warning that France is unwilling to deploy enough military force to stop attacking Libyan forces from seizing all northern Chad. The French strategy appears to be to accept a partial Libyan military victory in order to avoid a major confrontation with Col. Khadafy, which would endanger French economic and financial interests in Libya. Paris insists there is no alternative in view of the unpopularity with the French public of the pro-Western Habre government. President Mitterrand is reported ready as needed, however, to send substantial ground forces plus air power to help keep the capital of N'Djamena from falling. If they are sent, French reinforcements will join some 2,500 troops from Zaire who are being air-lifted to N'Djamena by American planes. In backstage talks, U.S. administration leaders have made it known they will not substitute American personnel to carry out military responsibilities the U.S. believes the French should show. American aid will not be escalated, officials say. No U.S. troops will be sent to Chad. U.S. intelligence believes that even a partial victory will threaten Libya's neighbors, particularly Niger, a former French colony with uranium deposits. President Reagan is reported disappointed that the French are not doing more to stop Khadafy. But French authorities explain that French public opinion would not back a major French military involvement in Chad any more than American public opinion will support American military intervention in El Salvador. John Scali, ABC News, Washington.