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 CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
 26 June 1985

INTERNATIONAL

Qaddafi pursues dual strategy in effort to expand Libya's influence in Chad

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N'Djamena, Chad

Here in a highly strategic country twice the area of France, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi pursues a double strategy in his apparent effort to expand his government's influence.

Moving to try to contain him are France, the United States, the Chadian government of President Hissein Habré, and such African states as Niger and Zaire.

Chad may be the world's poorest nation (according to the World Bank), thinly populated (less than 5 million people), more than half desert, and devastated by drought. But it is also Libya's southern neighbor and borders on traditionally pro-Western Sudan and Cameroon. Fierce civil war and French-Libyan confrontation have racked the country for two decades.

The first element of Colonel Qaddafi's dual strategy is unfolding in northern Chad, where, according to knowledgeable sources here, Libya is now hard-surfacing a long 10,000-foot runway at a new airfield.

This causes the Chadians anguish, says an inside source, "because it confirms that Libya has engineered the de facto partition of Chad. Libya has been able to reach the south of Chad with long-range Soviet aircraft but the new airstrip gives shorter range planes the ability to fly farther south than ever before."

The second element of the strategy is apparent in reports from these same sources stating that Libya is dropping arms in southern Chad to commando units to encourage them in their rebellion against President Habré. French intelligence has confirmed two such arms drops recently, sources report.

There is some surprise here that Qaddafi has not launched a military offensive south of the two main northern cities he still holds (Faya-Largeau and Fada) since making and then breaking a troop withdrawal agreement with French President François Mitterrand in Cyprus last September. The French withdrew. The Libyans did not.

Western sources agree, however, that Qaddafi retains the ability to launch an offensive when he chooses. "He has the initiative and he is impossible to predict," one source says.

It may be partly wishful thinking, but there is some lingering hope here that Qaddafi may face opposition from his own armed forces to another campaign of the kind that brought French

troops into Chad in 1983 in an operation codenamed "Manta." In August 1983 Libyan troops entered northern Chad in support of insurgents, prompting the Chadian government to ask for French support.

French policy, as summed up by one source close to French thinking here, is "Manta without manta" — keeping troops and aircraft nearby but not in Chad itself. About 1,200 French troops are believed to be stationed at Bangui in the Central African Republic, south of here, and more in Libreville, Gabon.

President Mitterrand, facing French legislative elections next May which many analysts expect him to lose, is thought to want to avoid the embarrassment in Chad suffered last year when the Libyans failed to leave.

"Yet if the Libyans do come south in a big way, the French will have to come in again for their own credibility in Africa as a whole," says an informed source.

"But they won't come in without clear reason, first because they don't want to be seen to be acting in a colonial way, and second because France views itself as a Mediterranean power as well as an African one and does a lot of business with Libya, including arms sales."

The word here is that the French prefer to act not as gendarmes (who step in to prevent trouble) but as *pompiers* (firemen who respond to a blaze).

Meanwhile the French have just announced that \$500,000 has been given to Habré to pay allowances to commandos who support the government. "The only way the government can keep these very poor *codos* [commandos] is to pay them," one source says.

The French are also raising their budget support to Habré this year.

Habré himself has been touring those parts of Chad — the south and the center — he controls. He is said to be planning a diplomatic offensive against Libya at the Organization of African Unity meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He is seeking the support of Zaire and Niger, both of which have criticized Libya for alleged subversive activities in their own countries recently.

The Reagan administration supports the Habré government against Libya as a way of containing Libyan influence in general.

As of Oct. 1, 1984, Washington had provided \$52 million in economic aid. US military aid runs at about \$5 million a year. In 1983, as the Libyans sent troops into northern Chad, President Reagan authorized up to \$25 million to purchase military supplies.

The US makes it clear that France has the primary role in this part of Africa. If Libya does move south, US pressure on France to react as strongly as needed will be intense. The US itself is not about to send troops.

"Habré seems to be gaining some ground now," says one Western source. "The French seem more committed to him."

"But," remarks another source here, "don't forget that Habré's home town is Faya-Largeau in the north. The Libyans hold it. Don't forget that the core of Habré's fighting support is northern soldiers. For both reasons he feels he has to go back north . . . eventually."