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HUMAN RIGHTS IN ALGERIA

ISSUE

The human rights situation has been sorely tested by the political crisis being experienced in Algeria.

BACKGROUND

Interruption of the electoral process in January 1992 in the face of the possible assumption of power by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) plunged Algeria into a serious political crisis. With an integrist-inspired terrorist movement contesting its legitimacy, the High Council for Security (HSC), a so-called transitional institution established and designed to make an eventual return to the electoral process possible, has continued its fight against the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), the armed wing of the FIS, and the Islamic Armed Groups (GIA), radicals who are convinced of the legitimacy of an armed struggle to overthrow the regime and set up a theocratic Islamic republic. The HSC has continued to use existing exceptional measures, in particular the state of emergency and an anti-terrorist law. The result has been escalating violence and an outbreak of terrorism that has left no segment of society untouched. Unofficial estimates place the number of victims at 50,000.

While pursuing a course of strict security, President Liamine Zérroual, the leader of the HSC since January 1994, has begun to talk with the incarcerated leaders of the FIS, whom he released and then incarcerated a second time, in order to reach a negotiated solution. After the failure of last June's negotiations, the HSC announced presidential elections for November 16, 1995. Three-quarters of the voters exercised their franchise, as opposed to 59% in the previous legislative elections of December 1991, a clear rejection of radical Islamic terrorism, whose adherents threatened violence on voting day, and of the moderate opposition parties, who called for a boycott of the elections. President Zérroual received 61.34% of the votes. Mahfoud Nahnah, the moderate Islamic candidate and leader of the Islamic Society Movement (MSI-Hamas), received 25% of the votes, and Saïd Saadi, the Socialist candidate, nine percent. A moderate Muslim, Nourredine Boukrouh, leader of the Algerian Renewal Party (PRA), received 4% of the vote. International observers from the OAU and the UN were present during the voting, and reported that the process was conducted in due fashion.

Having won the election, President Zérroual is in a better position to continue his efforts to develop a political consensus bringing together all of Algeria's political forces, including the moderate Islamists. A first step in this direction was taken with the arrival of three members of the legal opposition in the new government of 32 ministers and secretaries of state formed on January 5, 1996. The MIS-Hamas was given the responsibility for the Small and Medium-Sized Business Ministry and Secretary of State for Fisheries. The PRA obtained the