



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

Algeria - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Tuesday 11 & Thursday 13 June 2013

Information on an attack on Bentalha village (around 1996-97) including who carried out the raid, resulting injuries/deaths, any consequent arrests

A document issued in January 2013 by *Johnson's Archive* lists:

"22 September 1997--An attack on civilians at Ben Talha, Algeria, killed 277...Fatalities: 277" (Johnson's Archive (11 January 2013) *Incidents of Mass Casualty Terrorism*, p.5).

In September 1997 *The Irish Times* notes:

"Up to 200 people were massacred in Bentalha, on the outskirts of Algiers, early yesterday. The victims - as usual mostly women and children - were hacked to death with axes or burned in their homes" (The Irish Times (24 September 1997) *Algerians near limit of endurance*).

The *Washington Post* in a report issued in October 1997 states:

"For nearly four hours, they laid waste to the neighborhood of Bentalha, moving methodically from street to street and selecting their victims from a list, according to two witnesses and Algerian press accounts. Breaching locked doors with homemade bombs, they used knives and axes to slaughter entire families, including many children. Then they carried off whatever valuables they could find" (Washington Post (18 October 1997) *As Algeria's Savagery Grows, So Does Mystery Shrouding It*).

This article also points out that:

"The killers take a deliberate approach to their work. In Bentalha, for example, they approached on foot from an orange grove at about 11:30 p.m., cut electricity by tossing chains over power lines and divided into three groups, said two witnesses. One group cordoned off the area while the others spread out through the neighborhood of rough concrete-block homes and small courtyards shaded with grape arbors. Shouting obscenities, they exchanged gunfire with armed members of the local self-defense group while moving from house to house in search of victims, residents said. "One group watched the road, the other put bombs beside the doors and the third was cutting throats," said Khadim Ali Khouja, 36, a truck driver who saved his family by fending off the attackers with a shotgun. The neighboring Freiha family was not so lucky: After the attackers fled about 3 a.m., Khouja entered their three-room home to find the bodies of seven children and three women. Their throats had been cut. While survivors said they discerned no particular pattern to the killing, the victims apparently were chosen with care. "This list was very well done," said Khouja, who speculates that the neighborhood -- a onetime Islamic Salvation Front stronghold -- was targeted because the government had given weapons to some of its residents. "They were calling people by their names." Khouja and his brother, Abdel Rahim, said they identified the attackers as Afghans by their garb: black turbans, loose cotton robes and old military fatigues. Among them were two women, one in a red dress and the other in jeans and jacket, whose job was to loot the

homes of those who had been slaughtered, the men said. Like so much about the violence, even death tolls are subject to dispute. Benrabah, of the victims' group, said his organization has documented the deaths of 514 people in the Sidi Rais massacre, including 10 victims under the age of 2. That is more than five times the official figure of 98. Military officials did not respond to interview requests. More puzzling is the apparently passive response of Algerian security forces to massacres that in some cases have occurred almost literally under their noses. In Sidi Rais, for example, the killing took place within a few hundred yards of an army garrison, a portion of which is visible from one of the streets where much of the killing occurred. When the shooting started, several hundred residents fled on foot to the garrison, where they were given shelter in an adjacent villa, according to an older woman in a magenta robe who would not give her name. "I don't know why they didn't come," the woman said. "We cried and shouted that we have children, but the army didn't come." In the case of the Bentalha, soldiers stayed in their barracks because "they were afraid" of mines and booby traps, said Khouja. But he also wasn't convinced by the excuse. "Of course, we are angry," he said with a sidelong glance at a nearby gendarme. "In this case, no one can hide his anger." " (ibid).

In October 1997 *The Times* states:

"A Teacher who survived one of Algeria's most horrific massacres told the Times correspondent Anthony Loyd in Bentalha village, outside Algiers, how 150 armed men entered the village and, for 4 1/2 hours, killed nearly everyone they could find. In the attack, which left 217 dead, most of the victims, including a six-year-old girl, had their throats cut, according to the witness. At least 34 women were abducted. The Government blames the attack on Islamic extremists trying to win rural support through terror before tomorrow's local elections" (The Times (22 October 1997) *Survivor tells of Algerian massacre*).

Commenting on the attack, an *Associated Press* article issued in October 1997 notes:

"None of the residents of Bentalha or Rais questioned during a visit Friday could describe with any precision how the massacres unfolded. But nearly everyone said the attackers were dressed as Afghans, a reference to fighters in the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s: baggy pants and, in some cases, turbans and always in dark colors" (Associated Press (25 October 1997) *Algerian Massacres Remain Mystery*).

An article published in *The Irish Times* issued in October 1997 states:

"One month has passed since nearly 300 people were slaughtered in Bentalha. The basic facts of the massacre - who committed it and why - are still disputed. Most of the killers wore Islamic Afghan costumes. But some wore army uniforms. And why did the Algerian army - which has several positions nearby - ignore pleas for help? It seems that guerrillas who earlier enjoyed support here turned on those who no longer wanted to help them. "They fed the terrorists," a policeman posted in Bentalha said. "So why should we save them?"" (The Irish Times (21 October 1997) *Families hid and listened to dying neighbours' screams*).

Amnesty International notes in a report released in January 1998 that:

“In September some 200 people were slaughtered in one night in Bentalha, also south of Algiers. Many of the victims were women, children and elderly people” (Amnesty International (1 January 1998) *Report 1998 - Algeria*).

In December 1999 a publication by *Human Rights Watch* states:

“In August and September 1997, large massacres, officially attributed to "terrorists," claimed a total of more than 600 civilian lives in Bentalha, Rais, and Beni Messous, on the outskirts of the capital. Yet authorities never produced a complete list of victims, named suspects in the attacks, or issued the results of any inquiry into how assailants could commit such carnage close to military bases without being challenged by the security forces” (Human Rights Watch (1 December 1999) *World Report 2000 - Algeria*).

A report published in January 1999 by *Human Rights Watch* notes:

“The attackers who killed over 250 people at Bentalha on the night of September 23, 1997 entered the community on foot through orange groves, but according to at least one account, some also arrived in open-backed trucks. Even after the arrival of the army, police, and communal guard on the perimeter of village, the killers were reportedly able to load spoils into trucks before departing unchallenged” (Human Rights Watch (1 January 1999) *World Report 1999 - Algeria*).

Human Rights Watch in a report published in January 1998 states:

“According to survivors interviewed by Amnesty International, armed forces units with armored vehicles stationed just outside Bentalha did not intervene even though it was clear they were aware of the situation, and even stopped some villagers trying to flee from doing so. The army also did not allow neighboring local militia to enter Bentalha in response to the attack. After massacring over two hundred persons over the course of several hours, the attackers fled without being stopped” (Human Rights Watch (1 January 1998) *World Report 1998 - Algeria*).

The *United States Department of State* notes in a report issued in January 1998 that:

“In Bentalha on September 22, some 200 persons were killed over the course of several hours. Survivors reported that security forces with armored vehicles were stationed outside the village and stopped some villagers trying to flee. However, the attackers were able to leave. The Government asserts that security forces cannot respond to attacks against civilians because an attack might be a setup for an ambush, because the security forces lack night-fighting equipment, and because terrorists might have mined the area” (United States Department of State (30 January 1998) *Report on Human Rights Practices 1997 - Algeria*, Section 1a Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing).

In October 1997 *Amnesty International* points out in a report that:

“On the night of 22/23 September 1997, more than 200 people, including many children, were massacred in Bentalha, on the outskirts of Baraki, a few kilometres south of Algiers. The village of Bentalha is near five different army and security forces outposts. Two main army barracks are just a few kilometres away and several security forces post are only a few hundreds metres away. Survivors have told Amnesty International that at the time of the massacre armed forces units with armoured vehicles were stationed outside the village - just a few hundreds metres

from the place where the massacre was taking place. Yet they did not intervene, neither to stop the massacre nor to arrest the perpetrators, who were able to leave undisturbed. The killers spent several hours in Bentalha; they slaughtered, decapitated and mutilated men, women and children" (Amnesty International (27 October 1997) *Algeria: Children Caught in the Conflict*).

The *Associated Press* in October 2007 states:

"The violence in the sleepy Algiers suburbs of Bentalha and Sidi Rais in August and September 1997 was among the worst Algeria has seen. Throats were slit, heads severed, bodies mutilated. Bentalha residents recount how some 200 men dressed in black shot and hacked to death as many as 400 people in a six-hour killing spree. Women and children were not spared. Residents say they are still angry that security services stationed nearby did not immediately intervene. Other witnesses, often speaking from abroad, have accused the security forces of complicity in the massacres. Algeria's government says any abuses by security forces were carried out by rogue elements. The country's Charter for National Peace and Reconciliation shields security forces from accusations over their role in the conflict. Some in Bentalha said they were uneasy now that former rebels have been amnestied while the victims remain unclear about who exactly perpetrated the massacre. "They were Algerians, they spoke our language, that's all we know," said Fouad Tlidjine, 32, who saw his father and one sister killed and two other sisters abducted during the massacre" (Associated Press (2 October 2007) *Violence and questions about the past smolder in Algeria, despite push for peace*).

A report issued in February 2003 by *Human Rights Watch* points out that:

"One example is the massacre that occurred on the night of September 23, 1997 at Bentalha, a southern suburb of the capital Algiers, in which more than 250 people were killed. One of the survivors, who had fled to a rooftop with other residents, told Human Rights Watch he saw two military armored-personnel carriers while the armed group was assaulting civilians. "They came up to about one hundred meters away from where we were being attacked. Then they turned on their floodlights-I don't know why, since they didn't rescue us. The people started to shout that the military had come to their rescue, but the emirs [leaders of the attackers] responded by urging their men to 'work calmly, the military will not come, don't worry.'" The witness and other survivors from Bentalha quoted paramilitary forces saying later that their superiors had not allowed them to confront the attackers because they had not received orders to intervene from the military commanders under whose direction they operate. In explaining instances where massacres took place without any intervention by the security forces to stop or apprehend the attackers, authorities cited the danger to security forces of ambushes and mined roads. But in more than one of the recent massacres, according to survivors who were interviewed later, the security forces made no attempt to reach the scene of violence while it was occurring or to test the roads for mines. For example, survivors from Bentalha told Human Rights Watch of residents who escaped the area by driving out, without incident, along the same road that authorities later claimed were mined" (Human Rights Watch (27 February 2003) *Time for Reckoning: Enforced Disappearances in Algeria*).

In May 2005 *Amnesty International* notes in a report that:

"Fouad Boulemia, a former member of an armed group, was sentenced to death in August after being convicted of the killing of hundreds of civilians in Bentalha near Algiers in 1997, an incident which had not been fully and independently investigated.

Eyewitness accounts suggested that the armed group that carried out the killings had operated in conjunction with, or with the consent of, certain army and security forces units" (Amnesty International (25 May 2005) *Report 2005 - Algeria*).

An article in *The Guardian* issued in May 2002 notes that:

"In a recent book about a massacre in the village of Bentalha, a survivor, Nesroulah Yous, raised doubts about the true identity of the "professionals" wearing "false beards" whom he saw kill 400 people. Their victims were mainly Islamic sympathisers" (The Guardian (31 May 2002) *Death and dissent as Algeria goes to polls*).

Commenting on the book by Yous, a report by the *International Crisis Group* in July 2001 lists

"12 October 2000: Publication in France of "Qui a tué à Bentalha?" by Nesroulah Yous, accusing the Army of complicity and failure to intervene during a massacre of 400 people in September 1997" (International Crisis Group (9 July 2001) *The Civil Concord : A Peace Initiative Wasted*, p.22).

The *Inter Press Service* in February 2001 notes the Yous book and states in a report that:

"The massacre was officially attributed to Muslim rebels. But Nesroulah Yous, an inhabitant of Bentalha who survived the carnage, accuses the army. He now lives in France as refugee. In the book "Who killed at Benthala?" published last October, Yous affirms that army units surrounded the village while the "Muslims" committed the atrocity. The survivor's testimony includes other massacres attributed to Muslims, but probably committed by army units disguised as rebels" (Inter Press Service (13 January 2001) *Rights: EU Urged To Isolate Algeria, After Book Charges Abuses*).

An article published in *The Economist* in November 2000 comments on the Yous book stating:

"...Yous Nesrouallah, a small businessman and survivor of the massacre of Bentalha in which 400 people had their throats cut one September night in 1997. No friend of the Islamists, Mr Nesrouallah, who now lives in France, has just published a book in which he concludes that a special death squad attached to the security forces was behind the killing at Bentalha, a town on the outskirts of Algiers. Like other survivors, Mr Nesrouallah says the army was on the scene the night of the massacre. Soldiers blocked access to the areas where the killings took place, preventing neighbours from coming to the aid of the victims; a helicopter circled the area during the slaughter. Over five hours, amid an infernal din of screams, none of the nearby soldiers intervened. When the scores of assailants finally left on foot, not a single shot was fired at them" (The Economist (9 November 2000) *Thinking the unthinkable: Will the truth behind the appalling brutality of Algerias long civil war ever be known?*).

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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