

Commemorations held in France over 1961 massacre of Algerians



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Paris, October 17 (RHC)-- Commemorations were held to mark the 60th anniversary of a bloody Paris police crackdown on a demonstration by Algerians that occurred during the final year of the struggle for independence from the colonial power France.

Human rights and anti-racism groups as well as Algerian associations staged a tribute march in Paris on Sunday and called on authorities to recognise France's responsibility for the "tragedies and horrors" related to Algeria's independence war.

Participants at the commemoration called on authorities to open up the archives on the bloodshed in France's capital that day. "It's high time on this 60th anniversary that a strong statement be made at the highest level of the state," historian Naima Huber Yahi told Al Jazeera.

On October 17, 1961, protesters held a peaceful demonstration against a discriminatory night-time curfew targeting Algerians in the Paris region. About 12,000 Algerians were arrested and dozens were killed, their bodies thrown into the Seine River.

French President Emmanuel Macron has acknowledged the crimes committed by French authorities on that day, which were covered up for decades. "The repression was brutal, violent, bloody," Macron said in a statement released on Saturday, calling the massacre "inexcusable."

Historians say at least 120 protesters died, according to Macron's office. The exact number has never been established as archives remain partially closed. Some estimates suggest as many as 300 people were killed.

Macron paid tribute to victims on Saturday at the Bezons bridge over the Seine River in the northwest of Paris. He was the first president to attend a commemoration event for the massacre.

Speaking at the event, Macron told relatives and activists the crackdown on the protest under the command of notorious Paris police chief Maurice Papon was an "unforgivable crime." Yet, he stopped short of giving a public speech and issuing a formal apology.

Algerian journalist Maher Mezahi told Al Jazeera that Macron's actions had fallen short of expectations. "He simply has never recognised the state's responsibility in this massacre," Mezahi said.

While admitting the responsibility of the police authorities, the president did not acknowledge the role played by state-sponsored colonialism and racism. "The French authorities are always taking a half step," he added.

The president's move was part of a series of steps taken by him to address France's brutal history with Algeria, which had been under French rule for 132 years until its independence in 1962. Earlier this year, he announced a decision to speed up the declassification of secret documents related to Algeria's 1954-62 war of independence from France.

In 2018, Macron formally recognised the responsibility of the French state in the 1957 death of a dissident in Algeria, Maurice Audin, admitting for the first time the French military's use of systematic torture during the war.

Mezahi said there is still "a lot of unease" in France around integration, with French society not fully accepting Algerians and Algerians not feeling fully French.

Presidential elections are expected in France in April 2022, with the far right likely to further inflame sentiments around immigration.



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