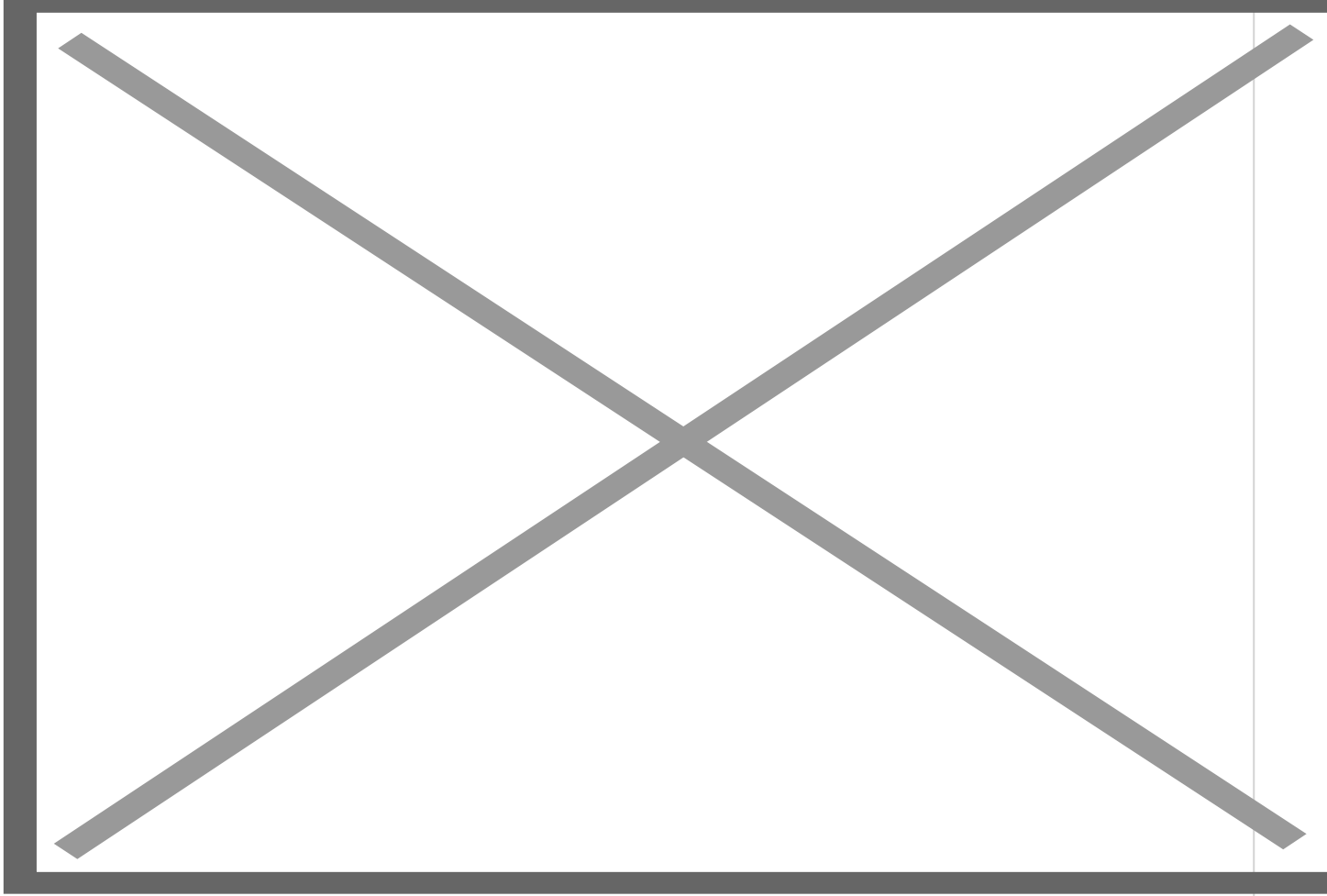# France remembers Paris massacre amid tensions with Algeria

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At a 1997 protest, people hold a banner reading 'The State Orders - Papon Assassinates' in front of an inscription on the pavement, '300 drowned by bullets' [File: Reuters]

Paris, October 16 (RHC)-- Sixty years ago, Algerians in Paris were arrested, killed, and drowned in the Seine by French police. They were peacefully demonstrating against a curfew on them months before the

end of the Algerian war.

Archives estimate that between 100 and 300 people were killed, but there is no exact figure. Historian Fabrice Riceputi says this is because what happened on October 17, 1961, in central Paris was a "colonial massacre." "One of the characteristics of all colonial massacres in history is that it is impossible to make precise assessments," he told Al Jazeera.

Widely regarded by historians as the most violent repression of a protest in post-war Western Europe, many in France still refuse to confront it. But today, in the context of growing social movements that call for racial justice and an end to police brutality, there is mounting pressure for France to confront its violent past.

In 2012, then-President Francois Hollande recognised the "bloody repression" in 1961, but historians say the government has not taken concrete action and that information about the event continues to be suppressed.

"What has been demanded since the 1990s, and requested by many groups, is that the head of the French Republic, so the president, officially recognises that this was not a regrettable mistake, but a state crime," Riceputi said. "This is what we expect from President [Emmanuel] Macron for the 60th anniversary."

On October 17, 1961, Algerians in Paris were called to organised a march by the Algerian National Liberation Front. Thousands turned to call for an independent Algeria, despite an imposed curfew.

The violent repression ordered by the then-Paris Prefect of police, Maurice Papon, was unparalleled. "Maurice Papon learned to apply these methods of terror in Constantine in Algeria for several years, and he imported them to Paris," Riceputi said about the infamous Papon, convicted in 1998 for complicity with the Nazi regime.

For Algerians in France, the memory lives on in collective memory. "For me anyway, perhaps it is the single most painful event of the entire colonial period," Algerian American historian Malika Rahal, who grew up in France, told Al Jazeera. "It doesn't question your relationship to Algeria, but it does question your relationship to France every day."

From censoring newspapers to preventing trials from charges filed by Algerians, researchers said the French state's decades-long effort to hide information was institutionalised. "That's part of the crime," said Riceputi. "It was committed and immediately denied, and the government did everything to impose silence, to cover up the event."

Rahal said when she studied history in Paris in the 1990s, many of her then-colleagues did not know about the Paris massacre. She first heard about it through her Algerian family, but it was so traumatic for her father that he never opened up to talk about what happened.

Even foreign historians say they have struggled to access certain documents. Amit Prakash, an American professor who writes about French decolonisation, said when he arrived in Paris to study the archives, he was often "blocked."

"They gave me access to a lot, but they said, October 17, those files which I did ask for, did not come within the purview of that question," he said.

Riceputi said the subject remains a taboo because it would trigger a questioning of France's public image and values once again.

"It would mean that we finally accept to learn that the French Republic is not a perfect entity by definition. It is the heir of the Enlightenment, of the Declaration of Human Rights, but it is also the heir of this

criminal past."

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