

New evidence reopens monks' massacre case

4:00AM Monday Jul 20, 2009

By [Catherine Field](#)

PARIS – They were seven French Cistercian monks, as poor in wealth as they were rich in spirit, quietly living in a monastery in the Atlas mountains of Algeria.

They were kidnapped one night by an organisation claiming to be the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a blood-drenched band fighting for an Islamic state in Algeria.

The GIA demanded the release of a leader held in an Algerian jail. Two months later, as France struggled to negotiate, the GIA declared it had slit the monks' throats. Their severed heads were found but their bodies have never been recovered.

Unfolding in 1996 in the thick of Algeria's civil war, the horror had a lasting impact. It convinced the public that France was right to back Algeria's military-led regime, itself accused of bloody abuses, against the GIA.

Now, though, fresh evidence has ripped the case open. It strengthens those who say the massacre was never quite as it appeared – or was even engineered by the junta. "I have had doubts about this event from the very beginning," said Armand Veilleux, then head of the Cistercians. He complains he ran into a wall of silence when he tried to probe what happened.

The new evidence comes from a retired general, Francois Buchwalter, then defence attache at the French Embassy in Algiers. Buchwalter says an Algerian Army helicopter came upon a bivouac and took it to be a GIA encampment. It opened fire, landed to investigate and found it had killed the hostages. To mask the mistake, the military severed the monks' heads, disposed of their bullet-ridden bodies and then issued a bogus GIA communique to claim the killings.

Buchwalter testified to an examining magistrate, Marc Trevidic, who has revived a long-dormant investigation. President Nicolas Sarkozy has offered full support, vowing to unveil all secret documents.

But smouldering suspicions have flared into life, threatening pain for France and Algeria. Trevidic's biggest task may be to prise the truth from French diplomats and spies who carried out the negotiations and nurtured France's relationship with their Algerian counterparts, said a GIA specialist.

"Neither the leadership of the Catholic Church, nor the French Government, pushed for a serious inquiry into this affair," said the source. "Everyone was in a hurry to file and forget. Why?"

Buchwalter's testimony is, crucially, second-hand. The account came from a friend whose brother was a pilot in an Algerian helicopter squadron, and he was unable to verify the evidence first-hand.

The source also notes the GIA used to cut the throats of its victims or behead them, but always when they were alive. "The monks were beheaded after they were killed and their bodies have never been found. Everything points to an attempt to prevent the bodies being examined."

This may bolster the most chilling hypothesis: that the outrage was carried out by fake terrorists controlled by the Algerian Army, seeking to pressure France to boost support for the junta. Two previous testimonies support this suspicion, pointing the finger at Djamel Zitouni, who seized leadership of the GIA in 1995. Before he was killed by a splinter faction, Zitouni orchestrated the GIA's bloodiest attacks on French interests, in Algeria and in France.

"The new judge, Marc Trevidic, is a very good magistrate, very independent," said Claude Moniquet, who heads a think-tank, the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre.

"So if this investigation doesn't lead to the truth, I think we'll never really know."