WEEK 3:

The Agacher Strip War, 1974 – 75, 1985

(Mali and Burkina Faso)

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| **The War:** | The Agacher Strip War was an armed conflict between Mali and Burkina Faso. It was fought over a 100-mile long strip of land located in northern Burkina Faso, in the province of Gorom-Gorom |
| **Date** | 25 – 30 December 1985 (5 days) |
| **Location:** | Agacher Strip, Northern Burkina Faso, West Africa |
| **Outcome/Resolution:** | * Ceasefire * Dispute taken to the International Court of Justice * Division of the Agacher Strip almost equally between the two countries in 1986 |
| **Casualties and losses** | 179 killed, 314 wounded in total  [Mali: 38 killed, 57 wounded; Burkina Faso: 141 killed, 257 wounded] |

Introduction

The Agacher Strip War was an interstate conflict that erupted between Mali and Burkina Faso. The war was fought over the disputed Agacher strip that borders both countries. The Agacher Strip is a 100 mile (160 kilometre)-long strip of land located in northeastern Burkina Faso. The strip, believed to contain considerable amounts of natural gas and mineral resources, was the centre of a long running border dispute between Upper Volta (renamed Burkina Faso in 1984) and Mali, which erupted into armed conflict on two occasions, first in 1974 and finally in 1985, when it was satisfactorily resolved.

Reasons behind the conflict

The Agacher strip was believed to contain substantial natural resources, which could be exploited for fortunes. Hence, by their calculation, both countries expected that the exploitation of these resources would help improve the dire economic situations that has characterised both countries. The war was believed to be an outgrowth of domestic economic troubles that characterised both countries since independence. Analysts of have argued that the dispute may have been deliberately provoked to divert attention from domestic problems brought on by the return to military rule in Upper Volta and the growing unpopularity of Moussa Traoré's military regime in Mali. For instance, Burkina Faso and Mali were two military dictatorships in 1974, with similar governments. The Burkinabe government's military rule waned in 1973, but when it began to resurface in late 1974, they needed to put down revolts by fighting an outside power. Mali had been setting their sights on the Upper Volta region of Agacher, which was filled with natural resources, for the same reason. The President of Burkina Faso, Sangoule Lamizana, ordered the deployment of a military force alongside the border with Mali, while President Moussa Traore of Mali sent an army to annex the region of Agacher.

The First "War" (1974)

The dispute erupted into armed conflict for the first time on 25 November 1974. The conflict was characterized by a lack of military operations or any significant fighting. Only a few border skirmishes that involved exchanges of small arms fire were reported in late November and mid-December. Casualties on both sides were minimal.

Regional Mediation

Mediation efforts by President Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo and President Seyni Kountché of Niger to resolve the conflict were unsuccessful and sporadic clashes continued into early 1975. As tensions escalated, numerous reprisals against Malians in Upper Volta were reported. This prompted the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to create a commission to mediate the crisis. The mediators recommended that a neutral technical commission be set up to demarcate the boundary. At a meeting held on 18 June 1975 in Lomé, Togo, both sides accepted the proposal. Thus, from 1977, Upper Volta and Mali engaged in political mediation within a regional West African group known as the Non-Aggression and Defense Aid Agreement (ANAD).

Agacher "Christmas" War (1985)

The revolution in Burkina Faso in 1982 brought a new military regime to power with Thomas Sankara determined to solve every issue including the Agacher territorial dispute with Mali. The relations between the two countries were already deteriorated when Drissa Keita, a Malian diplomat in Burkina Faso, was expelled. The two presidents, Thomas Sankara and Moussa Traoré, also had strained relations for a while. Meetings between the high diplomats of both countries to discuss the territorial issue failed and radicalism started to grow. Some Burkina Faso newspapers attacked Mali and accused Mali of preparing an invasion. Mali rejected those accusations and accused Burkina Faso of escalating tensions. By 1985, both countries had experienced several years of drought. The rain finally came in late 1985, but it washed out roads and hindered distribution of food and medical supplies to the region. During this period, the Burkinabé government organized a nationwide census. The census agents visited some Fula camps in Mali, which provoked outrage from the Malian government who saw it as a violation of sovereignty. There were reports of Burkina Faso ground attacks on part of the Agacher Strip since the new Burkina government considered the territory as theirs and since there was no formal contact with the Mali government. Mali President, Moussa Traoré publicly denounced the act and for ten days asked the African leaders to pressure Sankara. However, the Burkinabé did not leave the area and tensions grew further.

On 25 December 1985, the Malian military launched several local ground attacks against Burkinabé border posts and police stations. The Burkinabé army mobilized soldiers to the region and launched counterattacks. However, the Malian army proved to be more prepared and better organized with successful attacks and several bombardments. The Malian military seized the villages and attacked further. The Burkinabé reacted, but they suffered more loss. The Libyan government attempted to negotiate a cease-fire on 26 December, but this failed and fighting continued. The war culminated in a strike by the Malian air force against a marketplace in Ouahigouya, in which a number of civilians were killed. A second cease-fire initiated by the governments of Nigeria and Libya on 29 December also failed. An ANAD-sponsored truce signed on 30 December held, bringing to an end what became known as the "Christmas War.” Estimates of the number of people killed in the five-day war ranged from 59 to 300.

Postwar Resolution

In mid-January 1986, at an ANAD summit in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire, Presidents Moussa Traoré of Mali and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso agreed to withdraw their troops to pre-war positions. Prisoners of War were exchanged in February and full diplomatic relations were restored in June. Despite these positive signs, however, the dispute remained unsolved. The case was taken to the International Court of Justice.

In its judgement delivered on 22 December 1986, the court split the 1,150 square miles (3,000 km2) of disputed territory almost equally. Mali received the western portion and Burkina Faso the east. President Traoré called the settlement "very satisfying" and a victory for the "brother peoples" of Mali and Burkina Faso.

*Tutorial Question*

1. Account for the Agacher Strip War between Mali and Burkina Faso and evaluate the effectiveness of the resolution of the interstate war.