

Lifestyle | Features

# Tracing the babies who died in France's camps for Algerian fighters

"It's here," says the employee, quietly, at the vast Perpignan cemetery in southern France. Standing in front of two small mounds of earth in the Muslim section—rows six and eight, rows 22 and 25 — Abessia Dargaid collapses in tears. "So, so sorry!" she sobs, gently placing her hand on the piled-up earth marking the burial site of her baby brothers. Fifty-seven years ago, twins Yahia and Abbas died shortly after being born in a camp housing pro-French Algerian soldiers, 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) from the cemetery. After many decades of not knowing where the infants had been buried, Abessia's family has now tracked them down. They died during a tragic chapter in Franco-Algerian history that associations, historians and families have worked in the last few years to bring to light.

soldiers. Babies were buried in camp grounds, nearby or in fields, mostly without a name plaque, they said. For those who died in hospital, authorities arranged cemetery burials but often without relatives present or informed, families say. On an oppressively hot August afternoon, a prayer in Arabic playing on a phone, Abessia, her sister Rahma, 70, and brother Abdelkader Dargaid, 65, are shocked at the unmarked and forgotten state of their brothers' graves. "There's not even a first name on their graves?" a weeping Abdelkader asks. "It shouldn't be allowed, to bury someone like that and then abandon it, without a plaque..." adds Abessia.

**'Excess death rate'**

Most of those who died in the camps were stillborn or young babies, according to statistics collected by French historian

mother delivered a stillborn baby in November 1962, two soldiers came to their tent with a pickaxe to show his father where he could bury the body, he said. "My father didn't really have a choice; he was upset and afraid of rebelling and of being sent back to Algeria," he added.

Arfi's father dug a hole and wrapped the baby in a towel. "I gave him a hand covering the body with earth," he recalled. "It's shameful, what happened," said the now 63-year-old, whose family was later transferred to Saint-Maurice, still now, as then, a military camp notably used in World War II. "We were considered embarrassing witnesses of a dirty war, as undesirables," he said. The Algerian War left deep scars in both Algeria and France, where the harkis were an unwelcome reminder of the country's defeat. It was only in 2001 that France began to pay tribute annually on September 25 to the up to 200,000 Algerians who fought alongside the French colonial forces.

**Chaos, memory gaps**

Many still ask why the children weren't buried in nearby town cemeteries. Darrieussecq says she doesn't have an answer. "There has been recognition by the highest authorities of the French state that the harkis, these French, were very poorly greeted on their arrival in France in particularly unfit and difficult conditions," she said. France was not prepared and some things were badly managed in the rush to receive them, she acknowledged.

But if little is known, it is not the result of a deliberate desire to erase the past and stop more from being discovered, she believes. Mouden also stressed the chaos in which the arrivals were handled — 22,000 people transited through Rivesaltes from 1962 to 1964. Families became scattered, as many quickly moved on, or held swift burials to respect traditions. "Their vital concern was to find a home, a job, with the difficulty for many of not being able to speak French," Mouden said.

Some were searching for family members across France or in Algeria and protecting themselves against FLN reprisals that continued on French soil until 1965, he added. Historian Fatima Besnaci-Lancou, also an Algerian War expert and daughter of a harki who spent 15 years living in camps, interviewed more than 70 harki wives some years ago. She said women spoke of giving birth in a tent in mid-winter without water or heating, of their husbands fetching snow and melting it in their mouths to wash newborns. "These women themselves wanted to forget these events," Mouden said. "To go back to the graves was also to dive back into those months in the camps which were very difficult for the families." Some did return to Rivesaltes 30 or 40 years later, but the site had completely changed. Fear was also an issue. "It was like that then, our parents didn't dare ask questions, but they must have suffered a lot," Abessia said. And, the subject was taboo for many.

**'Too taboo'**

At 86 and speaking in the Berber language of Kabyle, Dahbia Amrane talked about the birth of her twin boys in



In this file photo Brothers and sisters of the Dargaid family (From left) 68 year-old Abessia, 65 year-old Abdelkader and 70 year-old Rahma gather to pay their respect to their brothers who died in 1962, at the Muslim square at the Perpignan's cemetery in Perpignan.

November 1962 at Rivesaltes. After several weeks in a hospital incubator, Omar died the following January and was buried in the camp by his father and cousins, she said. "God gave him to us and then took him again; these children are angels..." Amrane told AFP, in her garden in the small southeastern town of Mouans-Sartoux. The family was then moved to a different region—it would take more than 50 years for them to return to the burial spot. "There was no passing down of our history in our family... it was too taboo, our parents didn't talk about it," said Ali, 57, Omar's twin.

**Brought to light**

But now, some of the children are no longer anonymous. Their names gleam on memorial stones and renovated graves, such as at Bourg-Lastic. This is thanks to the work of Mouden, harki families and associations, as well as the French National Office for Veterans and Victims of War. By gathering statements, delving in to civil registers and analysing aerial photos from the last 40 years, Mouden was able to firm up a theory that a harki cemetery had existed at Rivesaltes. Over the last two years, about 40 families who lost a loved one at Rivesaltes have been contacted. And the site where at least 50 people were buried has now been identified.

Authorities decided against exhumation as, according to French archaeological officials, after so long, the mostly baby remains would unlikely be found. Meanwhile, in the Saint-Maurice l'Ardoise region, Arfi showed AFP two areas where he believes his research shows that 39 children and four adults were buried. "For 30 years we've been saying to the authorities that there are children who were buried in these fields..." he says angrily. One of the spots, now privately owned, is at the end of a winding path leading into a dense wood.

**Temporary?**

The Aracan harki association believes it has also recently discovered a children's cemetery at Saint-Laurent-des-Arbres, a few kilometers from the Saint-Maurice camp and that authorities have known about it for 41 years. The roadside spot has oak trees on it, AFP saw. Aracan's Nadia Ghouafria, 47, whose par-

ents were in Saint-Maurice, stumbled across a file in the local archives about the camp's "provisional" cemetery. It contained a police record, a plan showing the site of the cemetery and a burial register with 71 names of people who died at Saint-Maurice and neighboring Chateau Lascours camp. AFP was able to view these documents.

"Thirty-one children were buried in this provisional cemetery and, in 1979, 22 graves remained, essentially young children, newborns and stillborn babies," Ghouafria said. The reason indicated on the official record was a lack of space in local towns, she added, questioning how "provisional became lasting?"

**Left hidden**

The official record attests to authorities at the time knowing the cemetery existed. Its authors even advised "not making the matter too widely known" for fear it would risk "unfortunate" repercussions. "What makes me angry is that they deliberately hid the existence of this cemetery from us" despite repeated requests by local associations, Ghouafria said. Aracan has called on officials to take the necessary steps to find the children's remains, contact their parents and ensure they are given a proper grave, she added. "These children are forgotten in French history," she said. Asked about the official record, Darrieussecq said she was unaware of it. "But if there were burial places there, it's not normal that the families were not informed of it at the time," she told AFP.

**Forgiven**

Visiting the Rivesaltes memorial stone with names carved into it, erected in front of the burial site, has a profound effect on the relatives. For Amrane, it helps knowing exactly where his twin was buried and provides a focal point for his grief. It's a comfort shared by Arfi when he thinks of his brother. "We know he's no longer anonymous." And at Perpignan cemetery, having tracked down his brothers' graves, Abdelkader Dargaid says: "I've the feeling that the twins forgive me because I've come to see them today..." — AFP



In this file photo Brothers and sisters of the Dargaid family (From left) 70 year-old Rahma, 65 year-old Abdelkader and 68 year-old Abessia gather to pay their respect to their brothers who died in 1962, at the Muslim square at the Perpignan's cemetery in Perpignan, southern France. — AFP photos

Algerian loyalists, known as harkis, fought for France in their country's war of independence against more than 130 years of French colonial rule. French forces cracked down on the independence fighters and the vicious 1954-1962 war saw atrocities on both sides. But after France pulled out of Algeria, the harkis were abandoned. Many were massacred by the victorious Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), which accused them of being traitors. About 42,000 harkis, many with their wives and children, were brought to France, while another 40,000 came under their own steam.

Considered refugees, they were confined in six camps run by the French army, in poor and unhygienic conditions, some surrounded by barbed wire and kept under surveillance. Among them was Abessia's family, who had faced FLN attacks in Algeria because her father and brother had fought for the French. In December 1962, her mother gave birth to the twins in the infirmary of the Rivesaltes camp, north of Perpignan. The infants were ill and taken to hospital but died several months later and their bodies never returned to the family. "My father was just able to see Abbas's hand after he died in hospital," Abessia, 68, told AFP.

According to historians and family accounts gathered by AFP over several months, scores of children whose parents were in the camps died and did not receive a proper burial by their relatives or

Abderahmen Mouden. An Algerian War specialist, he is trying to identify the burial sites. At Rivesaltes, at least 146 people died, of whom 101 were children, 86 of them under the age of one. All 16 of those who died at the central Bourg-Lastic camp—open from June to October 1962 — were children, an official report published in 2018 showed. And several dozen children at the southern Saint-Maurice l'Ardoise camp were buried in the area, associations say.

"There was an excess death rate among young children, certainly linked to difficult living conditions and medical care that wasn't up to it," Genevieve Darrieussecq, deputy minister in the French armed forces ministry, told AFP. Historians point to tents or barracks for accommodation in the harsh winters of 1962 and 1963 and diseases, including a measles epidemic at Saint-Maurice. In addition they highlight the psychological impact on the young mothers, uprooted and weakened by the trauma of war and exile.

**'No choice'**

Hacene Arfi was six when he watched his father bury his baby brother at Rivesaltes—without ever being able to find the exact spot again. He said he'd already witnessed his father's attempted murder in Algeria in a knife attack and "women and children having their throats cut" while fleeing. The morning after his

## PANDEMIC PANNERS: INDONESIANS HUNT FOR GOLD IN DESPERATE TIMES

With the coronavirus devastating jobs across the country, desperate Indonesians are flocking to illegal gold mines as the soaring price of the precious metal overrides the risk to their lives and the environment. Spooked by the economic destruction wrought by the pandemic, consumers and investors around the world have been snapping up gold, which is seen as a hedge against volatility, sending its price to a record above \$2,000 an ounce last month. The surge in demand has fuelled a boom in mineral-rich Indonesia's illegal mining industry, with workers ignoring the threat of arrest, mercury poisoning or being caught in the middle of gun battles.

Father-of-two Mustafa is among the hundreds who play a daily game of cat-and-mouse with authorities in the restive Papua region as they pan for nuggets in a



Two miners panning for gold along a stream near Korowai, Papua province.

river near US-based Freeport's sprawling Grasberg site—one of the world's biggest gold mines. On a good day, Mustafa collects a gram of gold by sifting through the mud with a fabric filter, which he can sell to a local trader for about 800,000 rupiah (\$55) — no small sum in one of Indonesia's poorest regions. The miners here don't use mercury, he said, but there are plenty of other dangers lurking in Indonesia's rugged easternmost territory. Fear of arrest is ever-present and so is being caught in the middle of deadly fights between security forces and independence-seeking rebels locked in a decades-old insurgency. "There are more of us here now during the pandemic because the price of gold has jumped," Mustafa told AFP in a telephone interview.

"We're risking arrest by security forces, but we don't have any option because we need money to support our families." The arduous job also carries the risk of catching the coronavirus or skin infections from wading through waters chock full of waste from the nearby mine. "This is very dangerous for our health. Me and some of my friends have skin diseases," Mustafa said. "But thank god, so far no one has got the virus."

**'Ecological disaster'**

Thousands of kilometers to the west in Kalimantan-Indonesia's section of Borneo island—police this month arrested 400 gold



A miner panning for gold along a stream near Korowai, Papua province.

miners accused of operating illegally in a conservation area, a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Here, the dangers of mercury to both miners and the environment is severe, said Sustyo Iriyono, the environment ministry's director of prevention and forest protection. "The recent arrests in Kalimantan show that illegal activity was huge," he said. While the ministry does not yet have hard data, Iriyono said illicit mining has spiked nationwide, including on the densely populated Java island and remote Sumbawa.

"The high price of gold during the pandemic is the stimulus behind this... illegal activity," he said. "They're making profits by destroying the environment. We're trying to find a solution."

Environmental activist Aiesh Rumbekwan said the "massive increase" in unlicensed mining was being driven by people desperate to feed their families in the pandemic-battered economy. Government aid has been slow to reach many parts of the sprawling archipelago nation. "Illegal miners (often) use mercury to speed up the process and that will harm the environment and places where this activity connects to water sources like lakes or rivers," said Rumbekwan, who heads the Papua chapter of environmental network Walhi. "It could lead to an ecological disaster."

Indonesia banned the use of mercury for artisanal miners in 2017. But the dangerous metal, which can affect the nervous system and cause disabilities in newborn children, can still be purchased on the black market. The livelihoods of at least one million Indonesians are supported by small-scale mining, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which promotes mercury-free technologies. Despite pandemic restrictions, there are reports of unlicensed operators bringing scores of domestic migrants to makeshift mines sites across the country, which have long been prone to fatal accidents. "There's no control from the authorities," Rumbekwan said. — AFP



A miner panning for gold along a stream near Korowai, Papua province. — AFP photos



Amungme Komoro tribe members panning for gold nuggets along a river near US-based Freeport's Grasberg site in Timika, West Papua.