



NORTH AFRICA

# IMAGES OF A WAR IN ALGERIA

With elections scheduled for this week, a Swiss photographer shows remarkable pictures of everyday life in a country torn by civil strife

Photographs by Michael von Graffenried



By SCOTT MACLEOD ALGIERS

**T**RAGIC, BLOODY, WITHOUT END. Algeria's civil war is all of these things, yet it is also strangely invisible to most of the world. More than 70,000 people have died since the fighting began in 1992. Yet seldom does the U.N. debate the crisis, and no foreign ministers go on dramatic mediation missions. International diplomacy regards the war as an internal affair. Foreign journalists seeking to chronicle the war operate under heavy police guard and under threat of assassination by Muslim extremists. But a few have persisted amid the difficulties, and among them is Swiss photographer Michael von Graffenried, 41, who during regular visits over the past eight years has compiled a rare visual record of Algeria's turmoil. Von

Graffenried's work is collected in a new book, *Inside Algeria* (Aperture, New York, 158 pages), and is featured in an exhibition which has appeared in Paris and moves in May to St. Ursanne, Switzerland. It is a chronological account of Algeria's descent into hell, from mass prayers held after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of parliamentary balloting in 1991 to an amputee in a hospital bed in 1997. The totality of von Graffenried's images conveys the depth and scope of Algeria's misery. He rarely photographs a dead body, and many of his subjects are ordinary citizens going about daily routines—bringing a baguette home for lunch, sipping coffee in a café or bowing in daily prayer. In capturing the banality of the war he catches glimpses into the soul of Algerians in a way that a picture of a pile of corpses never could. In one re-

markable image, taken as the photographer himself sat in the back seat of the car, a plainclothes policeman panics in a traffic jam and pulls his gun in an attempt to clear the way. Though based in Paris, von Graffenried knew little about Algeria until he was invited by the Swiss Embassy in Algiers to put on an exhibition. He turned the project into a seminar, deploying local photographers to help produce the images for a group show. Once the civil war broke out a few months later, he began making repeated return trips. He credits his friends from the photography seminars for helping him to minimize the considerable risk involved, and praises the courage of Algerian photographers who supply local newspapers and international photo agencies with a visual chronicle of the nation's agony. Since 1993, more than 60 photographers and reporters, Algerian and foreign, have

been murdered by extremists. To move among Algerians, von Graffenried took advantage of physical traits that enabled him to pass for a native. He also strives to maintain impartiality. "I understand the viewpoints of both sides," he says. Both sides in the conflict, he reports, have tried to manipulate the press. The Interior Ministry once handed von Graffenried a portfolio of photos of severed heads in an attempt to convince him of the evil of fundamentalist violence and the righteousness of the government's fight. And lawyers for asylum-seeking Algerian fundamentalists in Europe asked him for pictures to help their clients' cases. In both instances, the photographer says, he ignored the approaches. The danger of being arrested by the police or assaulted by extremists nonetheless imposed restraints on von Graffen-

ried's technique. Though he normally uses a 35-mm Leica, for Algeria he chose a Japanese-made Widelux camera with a 150° panoramic lens that enabled him to shoot from waist level to avoid drawing attention to himself. The technique posed a dilemma: "I was ashamed to take pictures of people who would not have agreed," says von Graffenried. "This was an ethical problem for me. But it was the only way of getting photographs of everyday reality in Algeria." Algeria's cruel war shows no sign of ending. In an acknowledgement of his failure to end the crisis, President Liamine Zéroual is quitting before his term expires in 2000 and elections are scheduled this week for a successor. Islamic parties are still banned, but for the first time the military is tolerating genuine opposition candidates for President. The generals favor former Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bout-

flika, but he faces six challengers, including Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, an official of Algeria's former ruling party, who is backed by the Islamic groups. Hocine AR Ahmed, outspoken leader of the Socialist Forces Front, and ex-Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche. With violence escalating in the runup to the balloting, few dare hope that a change in government will bring peace. But thanks to the work of photographers like von Graffenried, the plight of Algerians will at least remain visible for those who take the trouble to look. —With reporting by Patricia Strathern/Paris