



# HISSEIN HABRÉ

## A CHADIAN TRAGEDY

A film by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun

"Heart-stopping; Unflinching." —*The Guardian*

Official Selection, 2016 Cannes Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2016 Toronto International Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2016 New York Film Festival

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## LOGLINE

Brutal dictator Hissein Habré was responsible for the deaths of 40,000 Chadians during his reign of terror. In his first feature documentary, acclaimed director Mahamat Saleh-Haroun shares the testimony of Habré's victims, who brought an African dictator to trial for the first time in history.

## SYNOPSIS

Brutal dictator Hissein Habré ruled Chad from 1982 to 1990. During those years, nearly 40,000 people died in prisons ran by Habré's police force, the Documentation and Security Directorate (DDS). In Mahamat Saleh-Haroun's powerful documentary, *Hissein Habré, A Chadian Tragedy*, the director documents the testimony of the dictator's victims. Led by Clément Abaïfouta, chairman of the Association of the Victims of the Hissein Habré Regime and himself a survivor, the film sees the survivors accomplishing an unprecedented feat: bringing an African Head of State to trial.

Two weeks after Haroun's documentary premiered at Cannes, Habré was convicted of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and torture, becoming the first living African President sentenced for his actions.

## PRESS ROOM

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## KEY DATES

**June 7, 1982:** Hissain Habré overthrows Goukouni Oueddel and takes power.

**December 1, 1990:** Idriss Deby overthrows Hissain Habré. Habré takes refuge in Senegal.

**January 26, 2000:** A group of victims file a complaint against Hissain Habré and launch a legal battle.

**July 2, 2006:** The African Union demands that Senegal judge Hissain Habré.

**June 30, 2013:** Hissain Habré is arrested and charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes and acts of torture.

**July 20, 2015:** Hissain Habré's trial begins in Dakar, Senegal.

**May 30, 2016:** Hissain Habré is convicted and sentenced to life in prison.



## SELECTED FESTIVALS

Cannes Film Festival  
Toronto International Film Festival  
New York Film Festival  
Sydney Film Festival  
International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam  
Dokufest International Documentary Film Festival

## IN THE PRESS

"Heart-stopping; sheds light on one of Africa's least-known mass killings."  
—*The Guardian*

"At a time when documentaries are increasingly resorting to gimmicky ruses, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's simple and austere film on the bloody legacy of Hissein Habré, the Chadian dictator who was found guilty of war crimes by a court in Senegal in May, is a breath of fresh air."  
—*Cinema Scope*

"Haroun's film is a harrowing reminder of what happened while the world looked away, a memorial to those who suffered and died, and a tribute to those who had enough courage, determination and hope to fight back and prosecute Habré in the courts."  
—*Sight & Sound*

"Despite the horrific atrocities that the civilians endured, Haroun's film effectively taps into the resilient power of the human spirit."  
—*Cinema Access*

"A powerful testimony."  
—*Variety*

# DIRECTOR'S NOTES

## THE MAKING OF THE FILM

I had been working on the subject for several years. I was in contact with Ms. Jacqueline Moudeïna, the victims' lawyer. I wanted to recount their struggle; to recount this chapter of Chadian history, which is mine too, although still little known. It was urgent to speak about these horrors. Hissain Habré's arrest on 30 June, 2013, in Dakar accelerated everything. I wanted to hear to the words of those who live through this tragedy, who still bear the scars, who suffered in their flesh, in their blood. These survivors were often innocent; they were arrested for no reason, the expiatory victims of a bloodthirsty regime...

I also undertook this work to question the tragic destiny inflicted on some people. Is it possible to still live together after such monstrosities? Can survivors still find a place for forgiveness in their hearts? What did they want from this trial?

## FILMING THE INTERVIEWS

Most of the interviews are conducted by Clément Abaïfouta, Chairman of the Association of the Victims of the Hissain Habré Regime. He is the main character. In the film, he is a kind of alter ego, the person I hand over to and who, in this capacity, introduces us to the survivors. My idea was to avoid carrying out classical interviews, creating the opportunity for Clément Abaïfouta to talk to the various protagonists instead.

To begin with, I chose to film the victims very frontally, facing the camera. They recount what they went through, as if directly addressing the spectator.

Then, I let Clément talk to each of them, completely freely, as if just having an ordinary chat.

My concern was to remain faithfully anchored in the present, giving the spectator the necessary keys to understand the system created by the Habré regime.

## THE NARRATIVE

There were several narrative approaches possible in telling this story. But during editing, I decided to focus uniquely on the victims' words. For they are stronger, more powerful, more moving too. This is the experience they went through. I structured the film like a fiction. They are characters with an objective to fulfill. It's this movement towards a goal that determines the filmic structure.

## THE LEGAL BATTLE

The trial was only possible thanks to the tenacity of the victims and their lawyers. A fifteen-year legal battle during which they refused to give up. The stalling tactics of the Senegalese authorities, who long protected Hissein Habré, slowed the judicial process. If the trial was finally held, it's thanks to the decision of the International Court of Justice, which forced Senegal to hold it. Sadly, in the meantime, many victims have died. The latest is an old man, Adimatcho Djamaï, present in the film. As a result of the tortures he suffered in prison, Mr Adimatcho was forced to spend the rest of his life lying on his back. He passed away the day before he was due to testify in court. From the start, I wasn't interested in the trial. Very rapidly, it was clear to me that I had to speak about Habré without showing him. Moreover, Hissein Habré refused to speak throughout the whole trial. What I wanted was the voice of those who had been through hell and who were demanding justice. I wanted to recount these ordinary folks' combat and the desire for justice.

In the end, I managed to talk about Hissein Habré without embodying him, with the exception of the day the trial opened, when, in a complete rage, he contested the legitimacy of the court and obtained the suspension of the trial. At the end of this story, my characters end up winning their struggle. They pass from the status of victim to that of hero for having managed to bring a former African Head of State before a court of law. That is historic.

—Mahamat Saleh-Haroun



## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

"Cinema should be more than just about entertaining people so that they can forget their problems," he says. "It should also be a way of reflecting about how we live our lives. I want to send out a universal message about the problems African people have to face. I don't think any truth is too bad to reveal."

—Mahamat Saleh-Haroun

Mahamat Saleh-Haroun was born in Abéché, Chad in 1961. In the 1980s, when dictator Hissain Habré ruled the country, Haroun and his family were forced to flee to France by way of Cameroon. In Bourdeaux, Haroun briefly worked as a journalist before moving to Paris, where he still lives.



Haroun began making short film in the 1990s. His first feature, *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), won the Best Debut Film prize at the Venice Film Festival. His next film, *Our Father (Abouna)*, received the best cinematography award in 2003 at FESPACO, the top African film festival held biennially in Burkina Faso. In 2006, Haroun made *Dry Season (Dararr)*, which won the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival. That same year, The Museum of Modern Art programmed an exhibition of his work. Four years later, Haroun was at Cannes with his new film, *A Screaming Man* which won the Jury Prize, making Haroun the first Chadian director to be accepted into and win an award in Cannes' main competition. Due to *A Screaming Man*'s success, the Chadian government funded Haroun's next film, *Grisgris* (2013) and he was able to open a government-funded film school in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. Other awards Haroun has received include the Robert Bresson Award at the Venice Film Festival, the Humanity Prize at the 34th Mostra Film Festival in São Paulo, Brazil, and the UNESCO Fellini Medal.

Haroun has served as a jury member for festivals including the Toronto International Film Festival and the Cannes Film Festival. *Hissain Habré, A Chadian Tragedy* is Haroun's first feature-length documentary.

*Photo by Nicolas Thévenin*

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2016 HISSEIN HABRÉ, A CHADIAN TRAGEDY (82 minutes)  
Cannes Film Festival  
Toronto International Film Festival  
New York Film Festival
- 2013 GRISGRIS (101 minutes)  
Cannes Film Festival  
Chicago Film Festival  
Dubai International Film Festival  
Sydney Film Festival
- 2010 A SCREAMING MAN (92 minutes)  
Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival  
Silver Hugo, Chicago International Film Festival  
Muhr AsiaAfrica Award, Dubai International Film Festival  
Hong Kong International Film Festival
- 2006 DRY SEASON (DARATT) (96 minutes)  
Amiens International Film Festival  
Ouagadougou Panafrican Film and Television Festival  
EIUC Award, Venice Film Festival  
Special Jury Prize, Venice Film Festival  
UNESCO Award, Venice Film Festival
- 2002 OUR FATHER (ABOUNA) (84 minutes)  
Hong Kong International Film Festival  
FIPRESCI Prize, Kerala International Film Festival  
INALCO Award, Ouagadougou Panafrican Film and Television Festival  
UNICEF Award for Childhood, Ouagadougou Panafrican Film and Television Festival
- 1999 BYE BYE AFRICA (86 minutes)  
Amiens International Film Festival  
FIPRESCI Prize, Kerala International Film Festival  
'CinemAvvenire' Award, Venice Film Festival

## FILM CREDITS

Title: *Hissein Habré, a Chadian Tragedy*  
Written and directed by: Mahamat Saleh-Haroun  
Produced by: Florence Stern  
World sales: Doc & Film International  
Co-produced by: Pili Films, Goï-Goï Films, Arte France  
Music and original songs: Wasis Diop  
Cinematography: Mathieu Giombini  
Editing: Christine Benoît  
Sound: Dana Farzanehpour

Running time: 82 minutes  
Image: Color  
Country: France, Chad  
Production year: 2015  
Release: 2016  
Aspect ratio: 16:9  
Sound: Stereo  
Language: French, Arabic

An Icarus Films Release

More Information:  
<http://icarusfilms.com/new2016/hiss.html>

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