

Mitterrand delayed war-crime probes

PARIS (AP) - French President Francois Mitterrand came under fire yesterday after admitting he slowed investigations of alleged war criminals to avoid risking civil conflict.

Socialist allies, however, came to Mitterrand's defense, calling his 90-minute interview on national television Monday night a bold and sincere attempt to set the record straight in the twilight of his career.

Judicial proceedings against former officials of the collaborationist Vichy government, which aided the Nazis in deporting Jews to death camps during World War II, have dragged on for years as France struggled with its wartime past.

Asked in the interview Monday night whether he put the brakes on certain probes, Mitterrand said: "Absolutely. It's true, but those kinds of judicial procedures reopened all the wounds."

Mitterrand, 77 and suffering from prostate cancer as he prepares to end his term in May, said it was his duty "to try to appease the eternal civil wars between the French."

He referred to Vichy as well as rightists' violent efforts to prevent



French President Francois Mitterrand prepares to meet the press on Monday. (Reuter)

France from granting Algeria independence in 1962.

"This revelation is important because it explains the length of the investigations," Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld told French TV.

Klarsfeld said it took 10 years to put together a case against Jean

Leguay, a former Vichy police official who died in 1989, before he could be tried.

He said it took 12 years to bring charges against Maurice Papon, head of the national police in Bordeaux during the war, who is charged with crimes against humanity for deporting 1,690 Jews.

"By presidential admission, I now understand better the difficulty victims' families had in obtaining reparations for what they suffered in the war," said Gerard Boulanger, a lawyer representing the families. "And now we understand better why Papon has still not been judged."

Mitterrand said in the interview Monday that he would not have interfered with a trial of Rene Bousquet, the former Vichy police chief killed by a publicity-seeking gunman in June 1993 before he could be tried for crimes against humanity.

Klarsfeld contended Mitterrand had tried to interfere before the case was heard.

"The procedure could have lasted much longer, but the Criminal Appeals Court of Paris rejected the intrusion by the executive that asked that it be judged by the High Court of Justice," he said.

Klarsfeld also said he was "effectively unsatisfied" by Mitterrand's explanations for associating with Bousquet after the war. The president argued that while Bousquet was convicted of war crimes, he was pardoned and had become influential in French business and government.

Historian Henri Amouroux said Mitterrand knew very well what Bousquet had done during World War II.

"You had to be really blind and deaf not to know in 1947, '48, '49 and afterward, the role played by Bousquet," he said.

After facing years of criticism from Jewish and Resistance groups, Mitterrand last year stopped having a wreath placed at the tomb of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the former Vichy leader.