

Colonial Reoccupation of West Africa? French Troops Will Stay in Mali Even After United Nations Forces Arrive

Paris has been re-occupying the West African state since January

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Global Research, April 29, 2013

Pan-African News Wire

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has visited the West African state of Mali where his troops have been fighting since January. France intervened in the central and northern regions of Mali in a purported campaign to remove the presence of several Islamic organizations which have been designated as terrorists by Paris and other imperialist states.

Recently the United Nations Security Council authorized the deployment of approximately 12,500 peacekeeping troops which will establish bases at various points in these contested areas of Mali. This UN force is also structured to take the place of a 6,000-person regional African force which has been fighting alongside the French troops against three armed Islamist groups in the north.

Although Francois Hollande's government said in January that the French operation in Mali would be short-lived, the plans have now been revised. France claims that it has drawn down some of its troops leaving 4,000 in the country.

According to reports from the French defense ministry at least 1,000 troops will remain in Mali until the end of the year. 250 of these soldiers are specifically slated to be involved in a training mission with the Malian army, while the other 750 are to continue combat operations.

A major area of the fighting has been in Gao where the French Defense Minister Le Drian visited. The official announced that several hundred troops would be transferred from Timbuktu to Gao, leaving only 20 behind in the ancient city which centuries-ago was a center of Islamic scholarship and international trade.

In addition to the presence of French soldiers, a contingent of troops from neighboring Burkina Faso is operating in Timbuktu. These Burkinabe soldiers are part of the West African regional force mobilized by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

According to French Colonel Cyrille Zimmer, the Burkinabe troops are taking over control of military operations in Timbuktu. He said that "We are leaving a small detachment of 20 men who are going to operate with the Burkinabe battalion. This detachment is going to stay in Timbuktu while the Burkinabes are there." (Associated Press, April 29)

There have also been efforts to draw more western states into the war in Mali. Germany has committed to supplying military trainers through the European Union.

The United States has been involved in Mali for many years with the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) supplying training, equipment and monetary resources. However, these efforts have only created instability inside the country.

When the junior military officers seized power in March 2012 from the elected President Amadou Toumani Toure, these soldiers were led by a U.S.-trained colonel, Amadou Sanogo, who had studied in several academies set up by the Pentagon. The Pentagon has been transporting French troops into the battle in Mali and has recently deployed 100 Special Forces in neighboring Niger in addition to establishing a drone station there.

There has also been a call made by Michael Byers, Chair of Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia in Canada, to have Ottawa become more involved in the Malian crisis. Byers in an editorial published in the Globe and Mail, Canada's leading newspaper, attempted to make an argument for the deployment of troops to Mali.

Byers wrote on April 29 that "Canadian soldiers would be highly valued as 'force-multipliers' who maximize the impact of other, less well-trained troops. For nearly half a century, Canada filled this niche in every UN peacekeeping mission."

He continued saying "Although Canada has disengaged from peacekeeping in recent years, that shift was a political decision. When Canada's military leaders sought to have General Andrew Leslie appointed commander of the UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo in 2010, it was the Harper government that intervened and claimed that Canada's commitments to the NATO mission in Afghanistan precluded his taking part."

Therefore, the priority of the Harper government was to engage in more direct occupation efforts in Afghanistan as opposed to what would be considered a neutral stance in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nonetheless, the UN forces being placed in Mali could very well be subjected to hostile fire and other military actions by locals.

This peacekeeping mission will have three obvious challenges. It will be operating as a supposed neutral force while at the same time French and Malian troops are continuing their offensive operations against Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Also there is a growing degree of alienation on the part of the Malian people in relationship to both French troops and Malian soldiers. These soldiers have been accused of committing atrocities against the population where deaths, injuries and illegal detentions have taken place.

Humanitarian Situation Worsens in Mali

As a result of the military coup and the subsequent civil war in the north between Tuareg separatists and later Islamic rebel groups fighting against the national Malian army, large-scale displacements have taken place. The economic impact of the conflict has been devastating to those that have forced to flee as well as people remaining in their towns and villages.

Food prices have skyrocketed which has impacted working people and the poor. In a recent article published in the Guardian newspaper in London, it examines the growing food shortages in Mali where French troops have been the most active against the targeted rebel

organizations.

According to the Guardian, “On Thursday (April 25) four international agencies warned that northern Mali will descend to emergency levels of food insecurity in less than two months if conditions do not improve. Recent food crises in the region have left many people weakened and still in a period of recovery.” (April 29)

Even the Guardian acknowledges that the French intervention has worsened conditions for people living in the combat areas. In addition to cutting off supply lines it has created shortages and therefore precipitated hyperinflation.

This same article goes on to point out that “Food distribution has been disrupted by the closure of the Algerian border – an important route for supplies into northern Mali – and the departure of many traders. Aid agencies say herders have been unable to use traditional pastures and water points, while the falling value of livestock has made it harder to buy cereals.”

With the intervention of UN peacekeepers there is still no guarantee that the situation will normalize. If the experiences of other states are of any indication, such as the DRC, Somalia and Sudan, the deployment of UN forces may very well exacerbate tensions as oppose to lessen them.

The situation in Mali requires a political solution that can only be reached between the varying parties, governments and interest groups involved. This issue portends much for the future of Africa and must be seriously addressed by the African Union (AU) at their upcoming summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

With the increasing intervention of U.S., French and other NATO military forces in Africa, the social, political and economic situations in various African states will inevitably worsen. African states and regional organizations must devise a strategy to deal with this escalation of imperialist militarism which has implications for the continent as a whole.

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