

French, NATO War in Mali Spreads to Algeria

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Over 80 known dead in seizure of gas field.

France has deployed approximately 2,000 troops to carry out its war in the West African state of Mali. At least another 500 military personnel from the government of President Francois Hollande are reported to be on the way.

Air strikes have continued against various areas in the north and central regions of this vast country where a sectional conflict between the Tuareg people in the north and the central government in Bamako has been utilized as a pretext for a French and NATO intervention. The Obama administration and other European states have pledged transport planes, military advisors and intelligence coordination for the operations.

Although France has imposed a ban on reports coming out of the areas where military assaults are taking place, reports are still emerging of atrocities being committed by the former colonial power and the Malian army accompanying their troops. Reprisals are ongoing against Tuareg, Arab and Fulani groups in the north and other parts of the country.

Aerial bombardments against Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal have been reported in the north of the country. In Mopti in the central region, there are allegations of arrests, interrogations and the torture of civilians. (Observer, UK, January 19)

In Diabaly, which was taken after the French intervention, bombings were carried out on January 20. Despite these attacks, the town of 35,000 has still not been fully secured by French forces and the Malian army.

One woman living in Mopti from the Fulani ethnic group, which resides in various states throughout West Africa, said that her son had been disappeared. "We looked for him there for two or three days, but could not find him." (Observer, January 19)

The same woman went on to say that "some people told us that on the day he left, the army (Malian) shot two people and put them in a pit inside the military base." Another relative of the family also reported to the press that "We are Fulani people, the soldiers can tell from our dress that we come from the north."

He went on to note "Because of that the army suspects us—if we look like Fulani and don't have an identity card, they kill us. But many people are born in small villages and it's very difficult to have identification."

In the town of Konna which has been bombed by French fight jets under the guise of rooting out groups designated as "Islamic terrorists," abuses have also been reported. The director of the Sonef bus company was arrested for supposedly transporting rebels who carried out

an attack on Malian government forces.

Malian Justice Minister Malick Coulibaly admitted that “We arrested the director and some of his staff primarily for their own security.” Coulibaly acknowledged that there may have been abuses carried out by the armed forces in recent weeks since the French invasion and prior to the intervention.

In an effort to build a case for foreign involvement, the Malian government, which formally requested the Hollande administration to enter the country, has also invited the International Criminal Court (ICC) based in The Netherlands to investigate alleged abuses by the Tuareg separatist group, the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNL) and the Islamic forces, composed of Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), who are accused by the West of maintaining links with the broader Al-Qaeda organization in the region.

The killing of Malian troops early last year in attacks on Aguelhok is cited as the precipitating factor in prompting the military coup on March 22. The coup, led by Capt. Amadou Sanogo, who was trained by the Pentagon in the U.S., brought about the appointment of the interim President Dioncounda Traore and the former Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra, who holds a U.S. passport and has represented Microsoft Corporation in Africa.

The Malian interim government has cited the clashes in Aguelhok and alleged abuses by the Islamist forces in Gao and Timbuktu as the justification for requesting an investigation by the ICC. The ICC has been heavily criticized by the African Union (AU) and other political interests on the continent for their exclusive targeting of several government leaders such as President Omar Hassan al-Bashir of the Republic of Sudan.

Regional governments in West Africa held a summit meeting in the capital of Ivory Coast, Abidjan, on January 19. France has been pressuring the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to supply up to 5,500 troops to back up the French military invasion.

Troops from Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Guinea, Benin and other states have pledged to deploy troops. Forces from Senegal and Nigeria are already reported to have arrived in the capital of Bamako.

Opposition to the intervention in Mali is growing throughout the region. In Egypt there was a demonstration outside the French embassy in Cairo on January 19 and the government of President Mohamed Morsi has openly spoken out against the French military actions.

In Mauritania, the opposition is widespread from various political parties from the Islamic community to the left, which has criticized the French Socialist Party under Hollande for its actions in Mali.

In Algeria there has been strong criticism in the press against France and anti-intervention demonstrations also reported. The seizure of the In Amenas gas facility was clearly related to developments in Mali.

Impact of French Intervention Spreads to Algeria

Meanwhile in neighboring Algeria, the seizure of the In Amenas gas field has resulted in at least 81 deaths after the military launched an operation to retake the facility owned and operated jointly by BP, Statoil of Norway and the government in Algiers. The takeover of the facility was claimed by a group called the "Signatories in Blood" headed by Algerian national MokhtarBel-Mokhtar. The field commander of the operation was reportedly Abdel Rahman el-Nigeri, who is said to be from Niger.

Over 600 Algerians employed at the field were released by the captors in the early phase of the seizure. Some of the foreign nationals from Britain, Japan and other countries were also released and some escaped during the course of two attempts by the Algerian Special Forces units to regain control of the installation which provides substantial natural gas resources to Norway and other European states.

Deaths among foreign nationals have included at least 7 Britons, one American, as well as a Romanian. Many others are still unaccounted for by the Algerian authorities.

Algeria has been under tremendous political pressure from the U.S. to become involved directly in the war against Mali. Reports of French military utilization of Algerian air space has drawn intense criticism inside the country, which is a former colony of Paris where an eight year war of national liberation was waged between 1954-62.

Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State during the first administration of President Barack Obama, has traveled to Algeria recently in an effort to get the oil and natural gas supplier to enter the war in Mali. The Algerian government has been reluctant to get involved and has had strained relations with the authorities in Mali, including the military.

The combatants who seized control of the facility at In Amenas put forward a series of political demands in exchange for the release of the captives. They called for the cessation of French military operations in Mali and the refusal of Algeria to allow Paris to utilize its air space in the war.

In addition, the group demanded the release of several prisoners held in the U.S. in connection with the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Also, the captors demanded the release of Pakistani national, Dr. Affia Saddiqui, who is serving an 86-year sentence in a maximum security prison in the U.S. despite broad appeals within Pakistan for her to be repatriated back to the country.

France called the incident at In Amenas "an act of war." It has also stated that the intervention in neighboring Mali will continue "as long as necessary."

British Prime Minister David Cameron has stated that the war against Al-Qaeda in Africa could last for years, maybe decades. He has called for an international effort to address what London considers a major challenge to the imperialist states.

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) head, Gen. Carter L. Ham, has claimed that Mali represents one the largest areas in the world where Al-Qaeda has a base of operations. Ham in an address at George Washington University during December asserted that groups designated as enemies of the U.S. are increasing their coordination in West and North Africa. (Times of Malta, January 20)

Such statements coming from a high-ranking Pentagon official portends much for the future of U.S. military intervention in Africa. The anti-war and social justice movements inside the

U.S. must rise to the occasion and provide the leading force in the opposition to this renewed push on the part of imperialism to contain and repress the burgeoning resistance to domination of their peoples and resources.

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