

Standoff continues in Algerian hostage crisis

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The standoff at the Tinguentourine natural gas site between Algerian Special Forces and Islamist insurgents hostile to France's war in Mali continued yesterday, even as France escalated its invasion of neighboring Mali.

Algerian authorities have still not given a breakdown of casualties from the assault on the BP-Statoil-Sonatrach site by Algerian Special Forces on Thursday. They denied initial reports that 35 hostages and 11 to 18 Islamist fighters had been killed, however. Over 650 hostages have been freed, including 573 Algerian workers and roughly 100 of the 132 foreign hostages, among them Japanese, American, Irish, British, Norwegian and French citizens.

The Al Qaeda-linked Signed-in-Blood Battalion, which launched the hostage operation at 5:30 AM on Wednesday, are demanding negotiations to end of the French war in Mali. They are also proposing to exchange US hostages for two prisoners held in the US, the blind Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman and Pakistani scientist Aafia Siddiqui.

The Signed-in-Blood Battalion is reportedly led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a 40-year-old Algerian and leading trafficker of cigarettes, weapons and other goods in the Sahara. He traveled to Afghanistan at age 19 for training with Al Qaeda, which was assisting Washington in its proxy war against the Soviet-backed Afghan government at the time. He returned to Algeria in 1993 to fight the military government in the 1991-2002 Algerian civil war as a member of the Salafist Group for Call and Combat. The group renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007.

The Islamist assault team reportedly included Libyan, Syrian and Algerian fighters, as well as a French citizen and a northern European whom they fighters called "the Norwegian."

The assault is part of the political fallout from the bloody NATO war in Libya in 2011, which put Libyan associates of Al Qaeda in many positions of power within Libya. The war also flooded the broader region with weapons that are now being used for insurgent operations in Algeria and neighboring northern Mali.

The Algerian army apparently decided to attack the Islamists to prevent the possible destruction of the Tinguentourine site, which produces 18 percent of Algeria's natural gas exports. Algiers released a statement declaring that before the assault, the Islamists were "on the verge of going beyond the point of no return... a real disaster for hundreds of hostages and the installations of the natural gas site."

Yasmina Khadra, a writer and former Algerian army officer, told the French daily *Le Parisien* that the Islamists aimed for "a maximum possible number of victims and maybe to blow up the gas facility, which explains the immediate reaction of the Algerian forces."

The imperialist powers have clashed over what policy to pursue in the hostage crisis. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal to demand a halt to the attacks and lodge a “firm protest” against the launching of the operation. Tokyo also summoned the Algerian ambassador and demanded an explanation for the operation.

Washington also indicated displeasure with Algiers’ handling of the crisis. White House National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor said that President Barack Obama was following the crisis closely and had discussed it with British Prime Minister David Cameron. “We are in constant contact with the government of Algeria and have been clear that our first priority is the safety and security of the hostages,” Vietor said.

At the same time, Washington is intensifying its bellicose rhetoric and signaling that it is considering escalating its military intervention in the region. American officials confirmed that US drones are overflying Algeria, apparently gathering intelligence on the Tinguentourine site. On Wednesday, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta had told ABC News that Washington was studying how to “bring our military assets to bear” in the Algerian hostage crisis.

Yesterday, Panetta met with Cameron to discuss the Algerian hostage crisis as well as policy towards Syria and Iran. After the meeting, he threatened the Islamists in Algeria and throughout the region: “Terrorists should be on notice that they will find no sanctuary, no refuge—not in Algeria, not in North Africa, not anywhere.”

On Thursday, Panetta had made statements threatening Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, against whom Washington is waging a proxy war together with far-right Islamist elements. He cited unspecified information that Assad is preparing chemical weapons for use inside Syria, which the US has declared would provoke a US invasion of Syria. Panetta said, “Our biggest concern was the intelligence we received—that they were, in fact, putting together these ingredients into shells that could then be deployed against their own people.”

Paris was isolated in calling the Algerian operation “complex” and arguing against putting pressure on Algiers. Within the French ruling class there are rising concerns that the hostage crisis will undermine broader support for President François Hollande’s war in Mali and lead to open opposition in the working class.

Mocking Hollande as “a political leader clearly overwhelmed by events,” news magazine *Rue89* wrote: “This is how twenty hysterical Islamists can rapidly shatter the international consensus around his policy. This is how the first germs of doubt and discontent can emerge in national public opinion about the legitimacy of what has been presented to it as a civilizing mission.”

Within Mali, French and Malian troops retook the rebel-held towns of Konna and Diabaly in central Mali after repeated French air strikes. French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said French forces were facing 1,200 or 1,300 rebel forces.

The European Union (EU) pledged \$50 million to help pay for the deployment of Western African soldiers to assist the French war, but declined to send their own troops.

There are already fears that the Mali war, like the Libyan war before it, will lead to a regional escalation of violence. Yesterday, US Africa Command Commander General Carter Ham

reported that AQIM has established financial and operational links in northern Mali with the Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram.

UN officials released a report warning of escalating food shortages in Mali and anticipating that the number of refugees might mount from 230,000 to 700,000 as France's war continues. According to Zlatan Milisic of the World Food Program, "There are about 1.8 million people living in the affected areas, and one-third of them are already food insecure."

There are reportedly acute shortages of food, cooking materials and medical supplies in central Mali, where the fighting is currently concentrated.

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