

US, France deploy troops to Central African Republic

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The US and France are deploying additional troops to the Central African Republic (CAR), as anti-government militias close on the capital, Bangui. The intervention is part of a wider ratcheting up of imperialist military operations across Africa, with Washington and its European allies working to maintain their strategic domination of the continent and control of its natural resources.

The US and France were already conducting military operations in CAR before a rebel offensive threatened to topple the government of President François Bozize.

CAR is one of several central African countries in which at least 100 American Special Forces are active, supposedly pursuing fighters of the Lord's Resistance Army. President Barack Obama advised Congress on Saturday that he had ordered a "standby security force" of 50 troops to CAR, citing a "deteriorating security situation" that required the withdrawal of US embassy staff and other American citizens from Bangui.

France has likewise intervened, on the basis of protecting its 1,200 citizens in the country. After maintaining soldiers in CAR on a near continuous basis since granting formal independence to its former colony in 1960, Paris has in recent days boosted its previously existing 250-troop deployment to nearly 600.

Another 500 foreign troops deployed by the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), mostly from neighbouring Chad, are also in the country. The Chadian government has pledged to send another 2,000 troops to support the CAR government.

President Bozize's administration this month lost control over much of CAR. Seleka ("alliance" in the Sango national language), a loose coalition of anti-government militias, has seized towns across the country's north and east and is reportedly within 75 kilometres of the capital. Seleka accuses the government of reneging on 2007-2008 peace agreements mandating payments to rebel guerrillas and their integration into the national army.

Some residents of Bangui, population 600,000, are fleeing in fear of a rebel offensive, while the price of basic foodstuffs has reportedly risen by more than 25 percent. The government has imposed a night-time curfew that is reportedly being enforced by young people armed with machetes at makeshift barricades erected across the city's main roads.

CAR is one of the most desperately impoverished countries in the world. Life expectancy is just 50 years, only three other countries have a worse infant mortality and maternal mortality rate, and the majority of CAR's 4.5 million people survive through subsistence agriculture. The stark contrast between the country's extreme poverty and its significant

natural wealth—including diamonds, gold, uranium, timber, and oil—reflects both the devastating legacy of colonial rule and ongoing imperialist oppression.

Washington has seized on the crisis to further extend its military operations in Africa. The CAR deployment comes just days after the US military announced that a dedicated army brigade, with about 3,500 troops, would carry out continuous activities across the continent. The newly created brigade is a component of Obama's drive to ramp up the Pentagon's Africa Command (AFRICOM), which was first created in 2007.

A renewed scramble for Africa is underway. US imperialism's aggressive pursuit of the continent's oil and other natural resources is part of the Obama administration's drive to counter China's growing strategic influence, in the Pacific and internationally. Beijing has been developing close diplomatic and economic ties with several African states in recent years. The continent is now an important source of energy resources for both the US and China. With greater frequency, Washington is retaliating with military force.

The relatively limited American military deployment to CAR could quickly develop into a wider intervention. Pretexts are readily available—a worsening humanitarian crisis in the country and the role Islamic fundamentalist elements reportedly play in the Seleka force. The occupation of northern Mali, in western Africa, by Al Qaeda-linked militias has provided the rationale for the preparation of a foreign military intervention, authorised by the UN Security Council earlier this month. The US and France have been at the forefront of agitation for an intervention into Mali, following the country's destabilisation through the US-NATO regime-change operation in neighbouring Libya last year.

CAR President Bozize has urged the US and France to intervene against the rebel forces. In a speech last Thursday, Bozize accused unspecified "foreigners" of backing the rebels and suggested that the unrest was triggered by his granting of oil exploration contracts earlier this year to Chinese and South African corporations.

"Before giving oil to the Chinese I met with [oil company] Total in Paris and told them to take the oil. Nothing happened. I gave oil to the Chinese and it became a problem," he said.

French corporation Areva is currently developing one of CAR's largest foreign investments, a uranium mine in the country's south.

Pro-intervention protests, organised by or tacitly endorsed by the government, were staged outside the American and French embassies in Bangui last week. Demonstrators reportedly accused Paris of supporting the rebels.

French President Francois Hollande claimed neutrality, declaring: "If we are present, it is not to protect a regime, it is to protect our nationals and our interests, and in no way to intervene in the internal affairs of a country, in this case Central Africa. Those days are gone."

Behind this bogus "non-intervention" posture, the French government is undoubtedly working hand in hand with the Obama administration to determine the outcome of the crisis in CAR.

France has been intimately involved in every change of government in its former colony since 1960. Bozize received French military training before becoming CAR's youngest

general when he was just 32, under the notorious self-declared emperor, Jean-Bedel Bokassa. Paris armed and financed Bokassa while he was in power between 1966 and 1979, before he was replaced in a coup that was spearheaded by an invasion of hundreds of French Special Forces.

After spending years in exile in France, Bozize attempted several military coups before finally seizing power in 2003. The French government then provided crucial support, including having French military forces direct operations and launch air strikes against rebel guerrillas in 2006. If Paris now refuses to come to Bozize's aid, it suggests that French imperialism either wants anti-government forces in power or some other change in government in Bangui.

After meeting with African Union Chairman Thomas Yayi Boni yesterday, Bozize declared that he was willing to form a new "national unity" government with Seleka. Negotiations between the government and the rebels are scheduled for early next month in the West African country of Gabon

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