

West African states prepare intervention in Mali

Ernst Wolff

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A special summit of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the Nigerian capital of Abuja November 11 reiterated the readiness of the organisation to deploy 3,300 soldiers to the north of Mali before the start of the rainy season.

ECOWAS spokesman Sunny Ugoh announced that 13 countries will participate in the operation. The majority of the soldiers will come from Nigeria, Niger, Senegal and Burkina Faso.

Ugoh said the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU) would discuss the plan in the next few days. A decision by the UN Security Council was expected at the end of the month. Deployment of the troops could begin as soon as the United Nations gives a green light.

The aim of the intervention is to end the occupation of northern Mali by radical Islamists. The latter have joined forces with Tuareg soldiers who returned heavily armed to Mali after the war in Libya and brought the regions of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal under their control, proclaiming the independent state of Azawad.

In June the Islamists then expelled the Tuareg from the region. Since then, the area has been dominated by three radical Islamist groups: Ansar Dine (in Arabic, Defender of the Faith), MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) and AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).



Also in attendance at the ECOWAS meeting were representatives from other African countries such as Libya, Mauritania and Algeria, in the same region as Mali, plus South Africa and Morocco, currently represented on the UN Security Council. The leading role behind the scenes, however, is played by the US, France and the European Union. These Western powers have appointed African regimes to lead the intervention in order “to give the deployment an African face”, in the words of German Development Minister Dirk Niebel (FDP).

Many of the leaders attending the meeting in Abuja received the direct support of imperialist powers in the past. The ECOWAS chairman Allassane Ouattara was able to take over as president of the Ivory Coast after his predecessor, Laurent Gbagbo, was expelled by force from the country by France and the European Union. The former military dictator of Guinea, Moussa Dadis Camara, was educated at a school for army officers in Dresden, Germany and, according to the German media, officers in the army of Guinea are still trained in that country. Senegal, which borders on Mali, also receives military and police aid from Europe and Germany.

Within the framework of the German program “Equipment Assistance Program for foreign armed forces” (AH-P), the German army (Bundeswehr) has been supplying military equipment to Mali since 2007, along with Afghanistan, Ghana, Yemen, Namibia and Tanzania. The Bundeswehr has already established a training centre for engineers and began training army instructors in Mali in mid-November 2009.

A joint report from the German foreign office and ministry of defence shows that a budget of more than three million euros [\$US 3.8 million] has been allocated for German activities in Mali since the beginning of 2009. An additional expenditure of 3.3 million euros is planned for the years 2013 to 2016.

The conflict in Mali was triggered by the imperialist intervention in Libya. The Tuareg are a nomadic tribe that inhabit Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso and Libya, in addition to Mali. After the fall of Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, the Tuareg who had fought on his side were driven out of the country and returned to northern Mali where they took control of large stretches of territory.

The Islamists, who have now won the upper hand in northern Mali, were in turn strengthened by the Libyan war. The Islamic militants had been armed by the US and other Western powers as part of their campaign to topple Gaddafi. The devastating social conditions under which much of the population suffers in the region also creates a fertile recruiting ground for the Islamist forces.

This relationship is especially evident in Nigeria. There, the government under President Goodluck Jonathan, in consultation with the International Monetary Fund, drastically reduced fuel subsidies at the start of the year in order to repay interest payments to foreign creditors. The subsequent popular protests were suppressed by force, driving many into the arms of the radical Islamist group, Boko Haram. The fact that Nigeria now wants to put up the main contingent of soldiers for deployment in Mali is due to the links between Boko Haram and Ansar Dine and AQIM, and the resulting threat to the regime in Abuja.

In order to ensure that the fate of the military operation in Mali is not left in the hands of Nigeria, which could then use the conflict to increase its influence in West Africa, the imperialist powers have sought to improve their diplomatic and military ties to Algeria. French President Francois Hollande, who plans to visit Algeria in early December, has officially admitted for the first time that French police were responsible for the massacre of Algerians in Paris in 1961. Four of his ministers, including the interior and foreign minister, are due to visit the country in a few weeks time and at the end of October US State Secretary Hillary Clinton also flew into Algeria to meet with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

In return, the government of Algeria, which has a 1,400 kilometre long border with Mali, has indicated that it will do nothing to oppose a military intervention by the great powers. It can be assumed that the United States and France have made certain commitments to the Algerian regime, but details remain unknown.

Spiegel Online, however, has publicised some of the efforts made by Germany to secure the loyalty of Algeria’s ruler: at the start of 2011, the German government agreed to supply 54 Fuchs tanks (worth 195 million euros), SUVs and trucks worth 286 million euros, plus a guarantee of 2.13 billion euros to secure the delivery of two frigates. In addition, a German company has received a contract to produce 1,200 Fuchs armoured personnel carriers in Algeria over the next ten years—all for the exclusive use of the Algerian regime.



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