France launches war in northern Mali

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14 January 2013

French aircraft and ground troops attacked Islamist rebel forces in northern Mali on Friday and over the weekend, while hundreds more French troops arrived in Mali's capital Bamako.

Without even consulting the parliament, which will take up the issue today, French President François Hollande declared an open-ended war in Mali, ostensibly to help the Malian government fight Al Qaeda-linked forces among the rebels. He said the war would last "as long as necessary."

The Islamist Ansar Dine militia reportedly threatened to overrun a major Malian government airfield in nearby Sévaré, which is considered vital for any military intervention in northern Mali. This militia has controlled much of northern Mali since last April, after Tuareg forces fleeing the NATO war in Libya forced weak and divided Malian government forces out of the northern part of the country. For months, France and its NATO allies have been planning war in Mali.

On Thursday, the rebels captured the village of Konna after heavy fighting with government forces. The French Air Force retaliated, striking Konna on Friday and killing approximately 100 people. A French helicopter pilot was reportedly killed by small arms fire, and 11 Malian soldiers fighting alongside the French were killed. French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said the Islamists were driven out of Konna but remained in the area after "intensive fighting."

Ansar Dine spokesman Sanda Ould Bouamana told *Al Jazeera*, "The terrorist French military bombed Konna. The hospitals are now filled with the injured—women, children, and the elderly are the main victims. It's impossible to know how many have been killed, but the number is huge. Only five of those killed were our fighters. The rest are all innocent civilians killed by the indiscriminate bombing of the French air forces."

Denying that his organization had ties to Al Qaeda, Bouamana added that Mali "will be the Afghanistan of the region, and France's downfall."

Air strikes continued over the weekend. On Sunday, Algeria gave France permission to use its airspace to reach targets in Mali, abandoning its traditional opposition to military intervention in the region. This allowed France to launch air strikes in Mali with jets stationed in France. French aircraft are also operating from bases in Mali and in neighboring Chad.

On Sunday, French jets bombed rebel supply depots and bases in the major northern cities of Gao and Kidal. A Malian official in Gao hostile to the rebels told the *New York Times*, "The hospital in Gao is overflowing. Both morgues in the city are filled with bodies."

While carried out formally in cooperation with the coup-ridden Malian government, the French invasion of Mali is an act of imperialist brigandage. Justified to the Malian and French populations on the basis of cynical lies, the war will inflame a civil war that has already turned 300,000 Malians into refugees and set the entire Sahel afire.

As French bombs rained down on Mali, Hollande warned the country that it faces "aggression by terrorist elements" among the northern rebels. He added, "The terrorists must know that France will always be there when it is a matter not of its fundamental interests, but of the rights of a population, that of Mali, who wants to live freely and in a democracy."

The pretense that France is rushing in to defend democracy against Al Qaeda, with total disregard for its own "fundamental interests," is an absurd lie. First, the French government has no principled opposition to Al Qaeda. Libyan jihadist forces helped Paris and its NATO allies topple Muammar Gaddafi in the 2011 Libyan war, and Paris is still relying on the Al Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front in NATO's proxy war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

French imperialism is waging its war in Mali very

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much in line with its fundamental interests. A colony of France from 1892 to 1960, Mali is located in the geographical center of West Africa, a resource-rich area that was once the heart of France's colonial empire.

French nuclear energy firm Areva has already mined 100,000 tons of uranium since 1968 in neighboring Niger and plans to open the world's second-largest uranium mine there in 2014. The Hollande government is using the war to establish closer ties to the Algerian regime, which has immense reserves of natural gas. French forces are also deployed in Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast. All these countries are former French colonies.

France is working with the US, Britain, and other NATO allies to plan a broader intervention in Mali, for which various West African stooge regimes will provide ground troops. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon confirmed that Senegal and Nigeria had already sent "help" to Mali. Burkina Faso's minister of foreign affairs announced that his country would send 500 troops after a meeting of parliament in the next couple of days.

On Saturday, a representative of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced that the organization would send troops to Mali by today. The rotating chairmanship of ECOWAS is currently held by Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara, who was installed in power by a French-backed UN military operation in April 2011 after disputed elections.

France's right-wing parties lined up behind the war in Mali. Jean-François Copé, the spokesman of the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), promised Hollande his "support."

French neo-fascist leader Marine Le Pen praised Hollande's war as "legitimate," adding: "Our country has been called to assist by Mali's legitimate government in line with defense agreements between our two countries, in a French-speaking area."

The Mali war is the first major war launched by Hollande's Socialist Party government, which came to power last year. It is a devastating exposure of the role of petty-bourgeois "left" forces, such as the French Communist Party (PCF), the Left Front, and the New Anti-capitalist Party, which called for an unconditional vote for Hollande.

The intervention in Mali serves an important purpose for Hollande domestically—diverting attention from his vicious attacks on the French working class. It is no coincidence that, within hours of the assault on Mali, the Hollande government announced the most far-reaching "labor market reform" to date, including the imposition of more "flexible" working conditions. The measures, negotiated with the trade unions, were immediately hailed by the Medef employers' association for "enabling the country to regain its competitiveness."

France is working closely with NATO allies in its Mali war. The head of the US Africa Command, General Carter Ham, said the Pentagon was weighing a broad range of options to "support the French effort," including intelligence-sharing and logistics support, but was not considering sending American troops. Washington is reportedly studying a French request for the US to allow France to use its drones.

British Prime Minister David Cameron's office told AFP it was sending two transport planes to help bring in soldiers and equipment, but there would be no British troops on the ground.

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