

France continues to bomb Mali as Islamist opposition forces advance

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French warplanes continued to bomb Mali yesterday as French ground forces entered the country to protect the military junta of Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo from Islamist-led insurgents based in northern Mali.

On Tuesday morning, French warplanes bombed Diabaly in central Mali, which the insurgents had seized on Monday. Five people were confirmed killed in the town, which the opposition still reportedly held yesterday evening. Diabaly is only 400 kilometers north of the capital, Bamako, and roughly 150 kilometers from Ségou.

The insurgents' capture of Diabaly shocked Malian military officials. One commander in nearby Niono, who had predicted with confidence that the rebels would not seize Diabaly, told the Associated Press that he feared the Diabaly garrison had been massacred, adding: "We feel truly threatened."

Reports suggest that the Malian army is continuing to collapse. French citizens were evacuated from Ségou, Mali's fifth largest city with 130,000 inhabitants, amid reports that the rebels were beginning to send groups of fighters there.

At a press conference, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said that while the French bombing had halted the eastern component of the rebels' southward offensive, the western prong in Diabaly was "very present" and "threatened the south."

He added that French-backed Malian forces had also failed to retake Konna, the town initially bombed by the French to halt a rebel offensive on the crucial Sévaré airfield. Initial reports said that 100 people were killed in the bombing, mostly civilians.

A leader of the Islamist opposition group Ansar Dine told *MaliWeb* that the Islamist forces were leaving towns in northern Mali, several of which French warplanes bombed over the weekend to target the

insurgents. Recent reports indicated that 60 people were killed in the bombing of Gao.

France has announced it will triple its armed forces in Mali to 2,500 from the current 800 troops. These include roughly 500 infantrymen and 40 armored vehicles in Bamako, a few dozen troops guarding the Sévaré airport, and Special Forces units.

Various West African countries have promised to contribute troops to a French-backed African force in Mali. This includes promises of 500 troops each from Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Togo, 300 troops from Benin, and 600 to 900 troops from Nigeria. These forces have not yet arrived, however.

Yesterday, French President François Hollande visited a French military base in Abu Dhabi while visiting an arms fair to lobby for sales of France's Rafale jet, which is deployed in the Mali war.

In a speech laying out France's goals in Mali, he said: "This operation has three goals: first, halting the terrorist aggression that sought to take control of the country as far as Bamako; then protecting Bamako, where we have several thousand citizens; finally, allowing Mali to recover its territorial integrity, a mission that will be given to an African force we will support and that will soon be in the field to fulfill this mission."

Hollande crassly alluded to the fact that a significant consideration in French policy is the use of Mali to demonstrate the destructive capabilities of France's Rafale jets and boost their sales. After praising France's "exceptional" deployment in Mali, he told a Rafale pilot, "Thank you for your double mission, both operational and, I was going to say, commercial!"

The war in Mali is a brutal imperialist war, fought by France in the heart of its resource-rich, former West African colonial empire. The justifications cynically

advanced by France—that it is a war for “democracy,” or to restore Mali’s “territorial integrity,” or to fight “terrorism”—are shot through with contradictions to the point of incoherency.

While it claims to be fighting for “democracy,” France is invading Mali to back the Sanogo junta. The imperialist powers sharply criticized Sanogo’s seizure of power last March and briefly helped organize an economic blockade of his government by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in an attempt to force him from power.

The war is being fought in defiance of international law. UN Security Council Resolution 2085, the supposed legal basis of the war, does not authorize the war Paris is fighting. Passed under pressure from the imperialist powers, the resolution authorizes “the deployment of an African-led International Support Mission in Mali.” However, the fighting is being led not by Africans, but by the French, whose African auxiliaries have not even arrived yet.

As for Mali’s territorial integrity, the main force that has undermined that is NATO, by virtue of its bloody 2011 war in Libya against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Northern Mali, a rugged area the size of Texas and consisting largely of mountains and portions of the Sahara desert, long enjoyed considerable autonomy from the central government in Bamako. It is now the base of operations of a coalition of Tuareg soldiers who fled Libya after Gaddafi’s defeat and jihadist fighters tied to the Al Qaeda-linked elements who served as NATO’s main proxy force inside Libya.

Weapons are pouring into northern Mali, moreover, as Islamists raid the abandoned weapons caches of the Gaddafi regime. As Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki told France24, Tunisia and Algeria are functioning as a “corridor for Libyan weapons,” with Islamist groups transporting arms to northern Mali. He called the war “a hornet’s nest that can threaten the security of all the countries, including Tunisia.”

On paper, Hollande’s plan amounts to having French troops guard southern Mali while a small force of 3,000 ill-armed African soldiers patrol the vast desert wastes of northern Mali in an attempt to find and destroy the heavily-armed guerrillas and return northern Mali to Bamako’s control.

US and British officials are reportedly highly skeptical of this plan. One anonymous US military

source told Reuters, “I don’t know what the French endgame for this is. What is their goal? It reminds me of our initial move into Afghanistan. Air strikes are fine. But pretty soon you run out of easy targets. Then what do you do? What do you do when they head up into the mountains?”

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta tried to justify the French war by again presenting it as part of the “war on terrorism.” He said, “We’re concerned any time Al Qaeda establishes a base of operations. While they might not have any immediate plans for attacks in the United States and Europe, that ultimately that still remains their objective.”

This is a cynical lie. It is well known that the US is working closely with the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front in Syria and similar forces in Libya. In defending their collaboration in Libya with Al Qaeda-linked operatives such as Abdelhakim Belhadj and Abu Sufian bin Qumu, US officials described “local” Al Qaeda groups in terms directly contradicting Panetta.

One official told the *New York Times*: “We’re more worried about Al Qaeda infiltration from outside than indigenous ones. Most of them have a local agenda, so they don’t present as much of a threat to the West.”

France’s allies are assisting the war, nonetheless. The US is providing intelligence assistance, while Britain is providing transport planes for the French war effort. The German government will discuss its plans to support the war at a cabinet meeting on Wednesday. The German Press Agency announced that Berlin is planning to provide four Transall transport aircraft and an Airbus to fly ECOWAS troops to Mali.



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