

France launches ground offensive in Mali

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French warplanes and ground units continued their offensive yesterday against Islamist-led rebels in the impoverished African country of Mali.

French ground troops began an attack on the rebels in the small border town of Diabaly, 220 miles north of the Malian capital of Bamako. The town has reportedly been surrounded and blocked off by French and Malian soldiers and is witnessing hand-to-hand fighting.

Rebel forces had dislodged Malian government forces from Diabaly on Monday. Residents said the town remained under Islamist control last night, despite repeated French air strikes.

Thirty armored vehicles carrying French troops were reportedly rolling northward from Bamako airport towards rebel lines, in France's first major northward deployment of ground troops.

Yesterday morning, roughly 100 French soldiers also arrived at a strategically important bridge across the Niger River, near the city of Ségou, about 130 miles northeast of Bamako. According to a military spokesman, their task is to secure the bridge and keep Islamist forces from advancing further south toward the capital.

Since launching the war on Friday, Paris has sent 750 troops to Mali and carried out 50 bombing raids on cities, including Gao and Kidal in the northern half of the country, which has been controlled by rebel forces since April 2012. Twelve Rafale and Mirage jets carried out the attacks. According to French President François Hollande, the number of French soldiers will be more than tripled to 2,500.

Islamist forces who claim to be tied to Al Qaeda also attacked a natural gas facility at In Amenas in neighboring Algeria, which has emerged as a major transit country between the Islamists in northern Mali and Libya. Largely ruled by Islamist militias since the 2011 US-NATO war that toppled Col. Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has emerged as a major source of arms

for Islamist insurgents in northern Mali.

The Islamists took 41 hostages at the Amenas site, which is jointly run by BP, Norway's Statoil, and the Algerian firm Sonatrach. Two people, including one British citizen, were killed. The hostage takers are demanding the release of 100 Islamists detained in Algeria. The Algerian government declared that it would refuse to negotiate.

Military chiefs from countries in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met in Bamako on Tuesday to approve plans to swiftly deploy 3,300 West African troops, as foreseen in a UN-backed intervention plan.

Nigeria, which is to lead the military mission, pledged to deploy 190 soldiers within 24 hours, but cautioned that even if some troops arrive in Mali soon, training and equipping them will take more time. Nigeria is fighting an insurgency at home against the Islamist group Boko Haram, and could find it hard to send 900 men to Mali as promised.

West African soldiers, most of them badly paid and poorly equipped, need more time to become operational, making it increasingly difficult for France to give its war an "African face". The original timetable for the UN-sanctioned African force did not initially foresee a full deployment before September.

The African Union, which represents 20 African governments, also expressed its full support of France's aggression. The AU's peace and security commissioner, Ramtane Lamamra, said African countries outside ECOWAS could also provide troops and logistical support.

US officials are reportedly considering plans to ferry additional French troops to Mali, help refuel French aircraft, and send drones to Mali to carry out espionage or even bombing missions. J. Peter Pham, a senior strategy advisor to the US military's Africa Command, said: "Drone strikes or airstrikes will not restore Mali's

territorial integrity or defeat the Islamists, but they may be the least bad option.”

There are continuing doubts in Washington about joining French military action in Mali, however. The *Wall Street Journal* cited senior Obama administration officials who expressed doubts about providing help to France: “If we’re going to provide something to anybody—our closest partner or our most distant acquaintance on the international realm—we want to understand what the objective is,” said one official.

Canada on Tuesday sent a C-17 Globemaster aircraft to France, where it was to be loaded with equipment and personnel bound for Bamako. Canada has agreed to contribute the plane for one week to help ferry war supplies or troops into Bamako.

European imperialism is also backing France’s neocolonial war. European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton announced that EU foreign ministers will hold an extraordinary meeting in Brussels today to discuss the crisis in Mali. The meeting will focus on speeding up preparations for an EU training mission for Malian forces and other “direct support” for the Bamako regime.

Two British military transport aircraft have been assigned to help with the French troop deployment, the UK Foreign Office said. Belgium said on Tuesday it would send two C-130 transport planes and two medical helicopters, and Denmark is contributing a C-130 Hercules plane for three months.

A spokesman for Germany’s Foreign Ministry said Berlin is considering offering medical, logistical and humanitarian aid to the French war. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who on Tuesday and Wednesday hosted Ivory Coast President and current ECOWAS Chairman Alassane Ouattara, agreed to supply ECOWAS troops with two German Transall transport planes.

Italy expressed its support for France’s operation in Mali during a phone conversation Monday between Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi and his French counterpart, Laurent Fabius. Italy had received prior notice of the French action launched last week, Italian news agency ANSA reported.

European imperialism can also rely on the full support of Germany’s Green Party. Although critical of some tactical moves, the German Greens defended the French intervention as “in accordance with

international law.”

“France has rightly intervened in Mali,” said one of their leaders, ex-minister Jürgen Trittin.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, former anarchist and now head of the Green faction in the European parliament, called for the preparation of a German invasion of Mali: “The Germans should prepare for intervention when things get more difficult,” he said in an interview with the newspaper *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*. Asked if he could imagine German troops being deployed on the ground in Mali, he answered, “Yes.”



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