

France escalates Mali war amid Algerian hostage crisis

Kumaran Ira
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France has increased its troop deployment in Mali to 1,400, amid escalating fighting with Islamist-led rebels who control northern Mali and a hostage crisis at an Algerian natural gas complex that was seized in retaliation for the French war in Mali.

Yesterday, the Algerian military attacked the strategic gas complex in In Amenas, near the Libyan border, with tanks and helicopters. Armed militants of the Al Qaeda-linked Battalion of Blood brigade claimed to have taken 41 foreigners hostage. Some 30 hostages and 11 Islamist militants were killed in the strike, according to the Algerian government. The In Amenas facility's output is valued at \$4 billion per year and amounts to 12 percent of Algeria's production of natural gas, and fully 18 percent of its critical natural gas exports. As Italy reported a 17 percent shortfall in its gas imports from Algeria, energy industry analysts said the fighting would prompt Europe to rely more on Russian natural gas exports.

Washington reportedly flew a reconnaissance drone over the site to monitor the fighting.

Paris seized on the attack as a pretext to defend its decision to invade Mali, which it claims is part of a war on Islamist terrorism. French President François Hollande said, "What's happening in Algeria justifies even more the decision I took in the name of France to go to Mali's aid."

France launched the war in Mali last Friday to defend the unpopular military junta of Captain Amadou Sanogo, which still controls southern Mali, after rebels captured the strategic town of Konna. They are struggling, however, to halt the rebels' southward advance. France plans to ultimately deploy 2,500 troops and continue aerial bombardment of its former West African colony.

Fighting between French and Malian troops and

rebel forces continued Thursday in Diabaly, only 220 miles north of the capital, Bamako, as the French air force continued to bomb the town.

Despite French air strikes and ground assaults, however, the village remained under rebel control. The Associated Press quoted a resident of Niono: "There were bombardments last night in Diabaly and civilians have continued to come here to Niono, this morning I saw people who came from Diabaly and the Islamists still occupy the city."

As forces have been deployed north, Islamist forces were spotted in the town of Banamba, only 72 miles from Bamako, highlighting the Malian army's inability to halt the rebel advance. Troops from nations of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has pledged to send 3,300 troops to assist France's war, are slated to reinforce in those areas.

Reuters cited a senior Malian military source: "Banamba is in a state of alert. Reinforcements have been sent. Nigerian troops expected to arrive in Bamako today could be deployed there to secure the zone."

There were no reports of civilian casualties due to the latest French air strikes, though the bombings will obviously lead to a sharp spike in deaths. Initial reports of French air strikes against Gao and Konna earlier this week estimated there were between 60 and 100 people killed, respectively, in those two cities, including civilians torn to pieces by bombs and children who drowned in a river trying to escape the explosions.

French officials cynically claimed that they would try to avoid harming civilians. Admiral Edouard Guillaud told RTL radio, "France would do its utmost to avoid civilian casualties. When in doubt, we will not fire."

European Foreign ministers held a meeting in Brussels to discuss the Malian crisis yesterday, endorsing the French war and authorizing a military training mission to help the Malian army.

The French war in Mali aims neither to fight terrorism nor to establish democracy. Hollande is waging a reactionary war to prop up a Bamako regime dominated by the Sanogo junta and to enforce its authority in northern Mali against Islamist forces and northern Malian separatist groups. Its ultimate goal is to defend French imperialism's substantial corporate and military interests in Mali and in its other former West African colonies.

In so doing, Paris is intervening in defiance of the northern Malian population's well-known sectional hostility to the corrupt Bamako regime. This policy of presenting this war as a war for democracy and against terrorism is deeply cynical, as Paris and other NATO powers are simultaneously collaborating with Al Qaeda-linked forces in their war in Syria.

A desert and mountainous region, Northern Mali has long been a quasi-autonomous area, dominated by Tuaregs and ethnic Arabs hostile to the central government in Bamako formed after the 1960 decolonization of French West Africa. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were repeated uprisings and protests in northern Mali against Bamako, particularly by the Tuaregs.

After a Tuareg rebellion in early 1990s, the Gaddafi regime offered Tuaregs high-ranking posts in the Libyan army. In a 2012 interview with the French magazine *L'Express*, Touré said: "On the local Arabo-Tuareg rebellions, Gaddafi engaged in negotiations, disarmament, and finding positions for the rebels. ... Very early on, we alerted NATO to the collateral damage the Libyan crisis would have. We were not listened to."

The Libyan regime also helped the Malian government financially after its devastating privatization and austerity policies of the 1980s, which allowed French capital to take major stakes in Mali. As Touré told *L'Express*, "Libya made substantial investments in hotels, tourism, agriculture, and banking, thus contributing to our development."

The Malian crisis exploded after the NATO war in Libya. Tuaregs, who had fought alongside Gaddafi's troops and were persecuted under conditions in which

the NATO-backed "rebels" were hunting down people with black skins, returned to Mali in early 2012, many of them heavily armed. They helped Northern Malian rebel groups defeat the Malian army. Islamist militant groups—including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Jihad and Unity in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar Dine, and the Nigerian group Boko Haram—also played an important role, imposing Sharia law on an increasingly hostile population.

Sanogo deposed President Touré ahead of the April presidential elections, as military officers accused Touré of failing to deal effectively with the Tuareg rebellion. After initially trying to organize an economic blockade to bring down the Sanogo junta, France, ECOWAS, and the imperialist powers ultimately decided to back it against the rebels in northern Mali.

French imperialism fears that a collapse of the Bamako regime would undermine its influence with regimes in the region. France has significant corporate interests in West Africa, varying from energy and mining resources to cheap labor for French industry. It is relying on military force to protect its interests against rivals in the region, in particular China. It will use these forces above all to suppress working class opposition to French imperialist domination of the region.



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