

Australia: Government and media endorse French intervention in Mali

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Immediately backing France's neo-colonial intervention in Mali, the Australian Labor government last week repeated the bogus claims that the bloody military operation, which has killed and wounded hundreds, sought to defend "democracy" and stop "terrorism" in Mali.

On message, Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr told the media that his government fully supported the French bombing of northern Mali. Australia, he said, would do what it could to assist.

"The great issue that confronts us here is the advance of Islamist rebels on the south of Mali, which would threaten a situation akin to that of Afghanistan," Carr told Australia's ABC TV, adding that "terrorist training camps" endangered a number of countries south of the Sahara.

These cynical declarations are a re-run of the lies used to justify the bloody imperialist interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and more recently Libya and Syria. Mali is the third African country attacked by France in the past two years.

As the WSWs has explained, the intervention is not just about Mali. It is part and parcel of the intensifying scramble by all the imperialist powers to dominate Western Africa and secure control of the vast oil and other mineral wealth in the region.

These factors, of course, are rarely publicly admitted. The unwritten, but tightly-observed, rule is that the economic imperatives of imperialism cannot be mentioned. Australia's media last week, however, felt no such reservations.

Editorials and comments in the Melbourne *Age* and the Sydney *Morning Herald*, both owned by Fairfax Media, made it abundantly clear why the Labor government was supporting the French intervention.

Entitled "Australia must heed the cries for help from

a faraway land," a *Herald* editorial on January 17 declared that Africa was "no longer a diplomatic backwater for Australia". It noted that much of the \$24 million that Canberra had spent to secure a two-year place on the UN Security Council "went towards wooing the 53 nations of Africa".

Then the editorial focussed on the underlying reason: "Australian companies, big, small and gigantic, are rushing to join Africa's resources boom. The continent is expected to track an impressive economic growth rate of 4.8 percent this year, which makes Europe look sick."

The Australian government, it concluded, "must make good Carr's offer of support. Only urgent intervention will save Mali and its rich culture."

An *Age* editorial two days later was even more direct. Events in Mali and neighbouring countries, the newspaper stated, "might seem out of sight, out of mind" to most of its readers but events in the region were of serious concern to corporate Australia.

"BHP Billiton has a significant oil-producing interest in eastern Algeria; it owns 45 percent of the ROD Integrated Project in the Berkine Basin on Algeria's border with Tunisia. Perth-based Resolute Mining owns 80 percent of the big Syama goldmine in Mali's comparatively quieter southern region....

"Algeria supplies something like one-fifth of Europe's demands for natural gas—and that means its security, and that of its gas and oil fields, is important to the rest of the world. Endangering oil installations leads to higher oil prices."

These comments demonstrate that protection of ongoing mining super-profits in Africa, not "democracy" or "fighting terrorism", is the principal concern of Australian imperialism. The figures cited are just a small indication of Australian investment on the

continent.

According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, at least 230 Australian companies are operating approximately 650 projects in mining exploration, extraction and processing, in 42 African countries. Total current and projected investment exceeds \$50 billion, having tripled since 2005. One in five Australian resources companies now has its primary asset located in Africa.

Western Australia hosts an annual “Africa Down Under” investment conference, which has expanded over the past nine years to become the biggest African resources event held outside Africa. Last year, it was attended by more than 2,500 delegates, including 17 African government ministers and four Australian cabinet members.

“Mining in Africa: Six keys to success,” a KPMG investment brochure distributed at the event stated: “There’s no doubt about it, Africa is ‘hot’ as a mining destination for Australian companies looking for continued growth. The relatively untapped continent is experiencing a renaissance and presents some of the best investment mining opportunities in the world over the years to come.”

The Gillard government is facing a federal election this year and has, thus far, steered clear of making any public commitment of aid or military resources to any African operation. Agitation for increased foreign affairs department spending and for future military action, however, is intensifying.

On January 19, *Sydney Morning Herald* editor-at-large Mark Baker reported that “the nostrils of [Australia’s] diplomatic corps [were] flaring at the whiff of African cordite.” With Australia now a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, the government, he said, had to respond by boosting foreign affairs spending.

“While the return to the Security Council might see Australia punching above its weight in the international arena, we are in desperate need of a new pair of padded-leather gloves and there’s an embarrassing hole in the backside of our old silk shorts ...

“Nowhere has the penny-pinching been more pronounced than in Africa—where we, as the new kid on the Security Council block, will need to be most engaged and informed. There are just five Australian embassies or high commissions across the entire

continent, including South Africa, and four consulates in other nations. Australia’s presence in 12 more African states is merely a consular shopfront provided by Canada—including in Mali.”

In an indication that Canberra is considering future military engagements in Africa, Australian Defence Force chief General David Hurley said on Monday that he had been examining the recent Algerian hostage crisis and would hold discussions with the government about how it should respond if Australians were kidnapped.

Hurley told an Australian Strategic Policy Institute event in Canberra that about 5,000 Australians were working on resources projects in Africa, but a clearer picture was needed so the government could respond quickly.

“We have significant commercial and industry extraction interests there. We are just looking at what Australia’s interests are in the region and we’ll have the conversation with government about how that is to be managed,” he said.

The pretext is being created for the direct involvement of Australian military forces as the scramble for Africa intensifies.



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