

France sends troops to secure Niger uranium mines

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Barely two weeks after invading Mali with over 2,000 troops of the Foreign Legion, France has dispatched special forces troops to neighboring Niger to secure uranium mines run by the French state-owned nuclear power company Areva.

The new French military intervention in northwest Africa was first reported by the weekly magazine *Le Point* and confirmed by military sources contacted by other sections of the French media. *Le Point* reported that French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had quickly agreed earlier this week to a “major innovation” in ordering the Special Forces Command to send troops to protect the Areva uranium production sites in Imouraren, and 80 kilometers away in Arlit. The magazine noted that this is the first ever use of the French commandos to directly defend the assets of a corporation.

The magazine reported that French government officials had taken the decision following the botched attempt to rescue the French hostage, Denis Alex, in Somalia and the recent bloody hostage-taking incident and siege at the Armenas gas facility in Algeria, where over 80 people were killed.

Those two events “in addition to launching the ‘Serval’ operation in Mali have significantly increased risk factors for French installations, including industry and mining in the region,” *Le Point* reported.

In reality, the dispatch of French commandos to the uranium mines in Niger only underscores the overriding economic and geo-strategic motives behind the French military intervention in Mali. Under the cover of a supposed war against Islamist “terrorists” and a defense of the central government in Mali, French imperialism is using its military might to tighten its grip on its resource-rich former African colonies.

Official spokesmen at both Areva and the French

Defense Ministry refused to discuss the new military deployment, citing security concerns.

In Niger itself, officials denied any knowledge of the dispatch of the special forces commandos. “It’s true that the terrorist threat has increased today, but as far as I know there is no such agreement in place at the moment,” one official told Reuters.

A Niger army officer told the news agency that there were already security arrangements in place that had been agreed to with France and imposed after the September 2010 kidnapping of seven employees of Areva and one of its contractors in the northern Nigerien town of Arlit.

“We also have counter-terrorism units in the Agadez region,” said the officer. “For now, I don’t know of a decision by the Nigerien government to allow French special forces to base themselves in the north.”

Failure to inform the Nigerien government of its plans would not be out of the question. Ever since its independence in 1960, France, which had ruled the country as a colony for 60 years, has treated Niger as a semi-colony.

The uranium extracted from the mines in Niger have been considered of strategic importance by successive French governments. The yellowcake produced from Niger’s uranium ore has been used to make France’s nuclear bombs as well as to fuel its nuclear reactors, which account for over 75 percent of the country’s electricity.

While vast profits have been reaped from Niger’s uranium, the mining operation has benefited only a thin layer of the country’s subservient bourgeoisie. According to the United Nations human development index, Niger is the third poorest country on the planet, with 70 percent of the population continuing to live on less than \$1 a day and life expectancy reaching only 45.

Moreover, the mining has exacerbated ethnic and regional tensions within Niger. Uranium production is concentrated in the northern homeland of the nomadic Tuareg minority, which repeatedly has risen in revolt, charging that whatever resources do accrue from the mining operations go to the southern capital of Niamey. One of the main demands of the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ), a largely Tuareg armed militia that has battled the Nigerien army, has been the more equitable distribution of uranium revenues.

Moreover, the exploitation of uranium by Areva has created an environmental and health disaster in the mining areas. The environmental group Greenpeace found in a 2010 report that water wells in the region were contaminated with radiation levels up to 500 times higher than normal. In Arlit, site of one of the major Areva mines, deaths from respiratory diseases occur at twice the national average.

France has every reason to fear that its intervention in Mali, which has already seen the bombing of civilian populations and the torture and execution of civilians by the French-backed Malian army in predominantly Tuareg areas, could cause armed conflict to spill over the border into Niger.

However, in addition to securing its profitable facilities from “terrorism” or popular revolt, France has other reasons to flex its military muscle in Niger. In an attempt to increase its share of the uranium profits, the Nigerien government has recently issued exploration permits to Chinese and Indian firms. By dispatching armed commandos, Paris is asserting its domination of the former colony as part of its African sphere of influence.

As France stepped up its African intervention, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used testimony before a Senate committee Wednesday to affirm Washington’s determination to escalate its own intervention in the region.

“We are in a struggle, but it is a necessary struggle,” said Clinton. “We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven.”

Clinton acknowledged that the rebellion in Mali as well as the hostage siege at the gas plant in Algeria had been fueled in large measure by the US-NATO toppling of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, where Washington and its allies armed and supported Islamist militias as a proxy ground force in the war for regime change.

“There is no doubt that the Algerian terrorists had weapons from Libya,” she said. “There is no doubt that the Malian remnants of AQIM [Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb] have weapons from Libya.”

She argued that, while there was no evidence that any of these forces in North Africa posed a direct threat to the US, Washington should launch a preemptive campaign against them anyway. “You can’t say because they haven’t done something they’re not going to do it,” she said.



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