

French army suppresses reporting of Mali war

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The war in Mali will enter its third month this week. Some 4,000 French soldiers, and about twice as many African soldiers of an international force fighting in coordination with them, have conquered all the major cities in northern Mali. However, there are hardly any reports of the fighting, and almost no pictures.

Since the start of the war the French army, in collaboration with the Malian army, has systematically prevented reporters and journalists from any possibility of conducting objective reporting.

Initially all international reporters were banned from leaving the capital, Bamako, where they were harassed by Mali junta soldiers who confiscated their equipment.

A week after the war began, a few selected “embedded journalists” were allowed to travel to the north of Mali. Correspondents were required to stay by their assigned units, however, and participation was restricted exclusively to employees of the French national media.

On January 31, Malian intelligence officers confiscated material from two journalists working for the French news channel France24. They had filmed a demonstration by soldiers of the “Red Berets” brigade, who are seeking to re-enter the Malian army.

On February 8 several foreign journalists were detained for hours in Bamako by “Green Berets,” who carried out the Malian coup last March. Reuters photographer Benoit Tessier and two other journalists who had witnessed and photographed the incident, were beaten and led away. Their equipment and mobile phones were confiscated.

After the conquest of Gao, about fifty international reporters were allowed into the city under strict conditions, but then escorted out of the city shortly afterwards, allegedly due to a suicide attack, without having done their work. Three television crews who

flew to Kidal were held at the airport by the French military until their departure.

Under the title “Atrocities in Mali,” the French television channel France 2 showed a 22-minute film on February 7, in which 45 seconds of film was shown of victims of the Malian army. France’s Central Audiovisual Council (CSA) reprimanded those responsible for the program, accusing them of “violating human dignity” by presenting images of dead bodies.

On February 28 the CSA stepped up its warnings, declaring that “repeated and excessive presentation of human body remains” is “unbearable,” especially for young audiences. Since then there have been no further critical reports of the war in Mali on French television.

Last week the chief editor of the Malian newspaper *Le Républicain*, Boukary Ndaou, was arrested without a warrant by the Malian state security service. A few hours earlier he had published an open letter by a soldier criticizing president Dioncounda Traoré for the payments he made to Captain Amadou Sanogo, the leader of the March 2012 coup. Ndaou’s whereabouts are unknown, and no charges have so far been brought against him.

The blocking of coverage of the war in Mali is based on an explicit command from the French army leadership: from day one, journalists were kept at least one hundred miles from the front lines and all theaters of war. They were only allowed to move in convoys and could not take photos. They were only able to enter conquered cities after all hostilities had ended and all victims had been removed.

Leading figures in the official media have come forward to defend such censorship.

Antoine Guélaud, editor-in-chief of TV station TF1, publicly justified the army’s policy, pointing to the

difficulty of finding “the right balance between information requirements and the safety of journalists.” The war in Mali, he continued, was not a “normal war between two countries,” but was directed against terrorists.

His colleague Phil Chetwynd, managing editor of Agence France Presse, also referred apologetically to a “complex and dangerous conflict.” Another journalist declared it was “still better to report as an ‘embedded journalist’ than not at all.”

The subordination of the French media to army discipline has definite precedents, notably the censorship of the 1954-1962 Algerian War, which was often described as a “war without images,” as the media censored the widespread atrocities, massacres, and use of torture by French forces.

Like General Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, the greatest fear of the current French government headed by the Socialist Francois Hollande is that such anti-war sentiment will fuse with growing anger against the anti-worker policies of the state and fuel social uprisings. For this reason the French army is determined to stick with its policy of a “war without images.”



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