

France's defense minister visits French troops in Mali

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The French Minister of Defense, Jean-Yves Le Drian visited the north of Mali on March 7, a region that French troops are still trying to reconquer. Le Drian was trying to assess troop morale and prepare the deployment of an African force to Mali, which will also serve French imperialist interests in the region.

No precise figures have been given for the number of killed in France's war in Mali, which began on January 11. However, they include hundreds of jihadists, four French soldiers, about a hundred Malian troops and as many Chadian troops and Mali civilians including children—one of whom was killed the day before the minister's surprise visit.

The French military operation in Mali has led to the recapture of the main towns in the north of Mali from Islamist forces: Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. The Islamists have retreated into the Ifoghas mountains, which are currently the scene of intense combat with French and Chadian forces.

The situation facing the Malian population is catastrophic. Towns and villages have been largely destroyed, forcing large numbers of people to flee the combat zone and find refuge in camps in neighbouring countries. Access to water and food is becoming scarcer every day, threatening a humanitarian disaster.

The forces fighting the French army include Tuareg militias, and Islamist forces which were armed and organized by France and other NATO countries to fight in Libya and Syria. They are financed by the reactionary Persian Gulf monarchies.

Le Drian sought to boost the morale of the French troops, declaring: "not just for the four who have died, you are the bearers of France's pledge, the commitment to our values". He saluted "the professional qualities, the courage, the calm, self-sacrifice" of the troops engaged in Mali, telling the press that "more than 70

percent of the job is done".

In fact, the withdrawal of the 4,000-strong French army from Mali will not take place in March, contrary to what had been announced, but has been postponed to an unspecified date. *L'Express* cited French President Hollande's remarks: "From April, there will be a beginning of a troop drawdown. That doesn't mean to say we are leaving overnight, we have to be pragmatic, it will depend on what is happening on the ground".

Le Drian's visit also aimed to silence criticisms voiced by the French conservative opposition about France's "muddled" operation in Mali and the need to maintain the support of public opinion after the death of the fourth soldier.

Afterwards, Le Drian visited Gao and Bamako, Mali's capital, to discuss the post-conflict situation and the deployment of the African force with his opposite numbers.

A March 7 article in *Figaro* quotes the tactical concerns of right-wing politicians over the social-democratic government's Mali war, though no one in the French bourgeoisie has questioned the principle of neo-colonial wars, like those in Libya and Syria.

Alain Juppé, a former Minister of Defense under President Nicolas Sarkozy, declared: "We have passed into another phase which was not foreseen, and today we are confronted with extremely high risks... the question posed is whether we have gone too far.I fear we are engaged in a spiral that we will have difficulty in mastering".

The Mali intervention is of strategic interest for France as well as the United States. It must ensure that France and the US secure the sites mining or processing minerals in West Africa on which France and other powers depend for energy.

The French military interventions in West Africa and

the Middle East mark a new stage in the imperialist reconquest of these strategic regions. Over some years, China has become Africa's leading trading partner—a position which the US and France find intolerable, given the economic rivalries gripping world capitalism.

France used force against Laurent Gbagbo in the Ivory Coast and against Gaddafi in Libya, both of whom had moved closer to China, to install puppet regimes more amenable towards French and US interests.

France, which is intervening in Mali with US support, was warned by two American senators returning from a visit there that France should stay in Mali beyond March.

Senator Christopher Coons, an Africa specialist in the Senate, said: "I'm worried about the optimistic public declarations of the French that they have succeeded in dispersing the extremists. The stabilisation of the situation could require a longer French military presence."

France has engaged in a long and costly war which has already cost "somewhat over €100 million" according to Le Drian, while the Socialist Party government is seeking to reduce its budget deficit through austerity measures demanded by the European Union and the banks. The limits of the army and of the French economy oblige it to pressure its African partners to help defend French interests in this region of Africa.

At a conference in Addis Ababa at the end of January, the imperialist powers promised financial aid of more than \$445 million for Mali, to finance the deployment of African troops in the country and the Mali army, as well as humanitarian aid.

West African regimes are asking for \$950 million and the Ivory Coast Foreign Affairs Minister Charles Koffi Diby requested an increase in the number of African troops to 8,000.



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