

German defence minister visits Mali

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Last weekend, German defence minister Thomas de Maizière made a surprise trip to Mali. He landed first in the Senegalese capital Dakar where the German army (Bundeswehr) has an air transport base with 90 soldiers. He then flew on to the Malian capital, Bamako, and on Monday travelled the 65 kilometres to the town of Koulikoro.

In Bamako, de Maizière met with his Malian counterpart, Yamoussa Camara, and Malian president Dioncounda Traoré. In Koulikoro, he visited a military camp where German soldiers have set up a field hospital and are making preparations for the so-called European Union Training Mission (EUTM), which involves 550 European soldiers, including 80 German soldiers, providing training to 2,500 Malian soldiers. The mission is due to begin on April 2.

The timing for de Maizière's trip was carefully chosen. A day before he landed, Edmond Mulet, deputy secretary general for UN peacekeeping missions, also visited Bamako. At the weekend, an international meeting of ministers took place in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, which borders Mali. The meeting was attended by representatives from countries adjoining Mali, as well as members of the African Union (AU), the European Union and the United Nations. The theme of the summit was "Security in the Sahel region".

The message from both de Maizière and Mulet, and the meeting in Nouakchott, was the same: the war in Mali will take longer than previously announced and will involve more soldiers across a larger stretch of territory.

Currently involved in the fighting in Mali are 4,000 French soldiers, 5,000 Malian soldiers and around 6,300 soldiers from the MISMA intervention force supplied by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). According to the wishes of the United Nations, these are to be replaced in July by a

separate UN "stabilisation mission", which involves a force of 10,000 soldiers. This requires a resolution from the UN Security Council.

After France, Germany is currently making the second biggest contribution to the war by European powers. Germany has stationed three Transall transporters and an Airbus A310 in Senegal to refuel French fighter jets. The Airbus has already flown eight assignments, and the Transall machines have undertaken around 170 flights transporting more than 420 tons of weapons and ammunition and almost 700 passengers.

The German parliament agreed on two mandates in late February for the Bundeswehr mission in Mali: one for the training mission, the other for transport assistance and in-flight refuelling, both limited to one year.

De Maizière made clear in Mali that the one-year time limit was insufficient. "You cannot train the very complicated and difficult Malian armed forces to provide security in their own country in 12 to 15 months," he said after talks with the Malian transitional president. "This is a huge task that requires staying power."

Dominique Moisi from the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) was even more categorical. "There is no African army able to replace the French forces," he said in Paris.

The German and French plans to remain in Mali for an indeterminate period confirm that the official reason given for the war—the expulsion of Islamist militias in the north of the country—was only a pretext.

At stake, in reality, are very definite geo-strategic and economic interests. Mali and the entire Sahel region are rich in natural resources, which the imperialist powers are seeking to secure for their own use, especially in competition with China. The war is part of the imperialist campaign for the re-colonial subjugation of

Africa, which began two years ago with the NATO war against Libya.

The trip by Defence Minister de Maizière to Mali, in which he announced an escalation of the military operation in the country, also sends a clear message around the globe: Germany is no longer willing to stand idly by and allow its economic rivals to share the spoils in West Africa. It is resolved to use its military might to ensure its share of the cake.



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