

France seizes on murder of RFI journalists to intensify Mali war

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The killing of two French journalists in Northern Mali a week ago has been used as a pretext by Paris to pursue its war in Mali, under the guise of fighting “Islamist terrorism.”

On November 2, senior correspondent Ghislaine Dupont and production technician Claude Verlon, who worked for broadcaster Radio France Internationale, (RFI) were abducted by unknown gunmen. They had just interviewed a leader of the Tuareg-separatist MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), in the northern Malian town of Kidal. A few hours later, they were found dead several kilometres east of Kidal.

The circumstances of the murder of the journalists remain unclear. It took place in a region at the heart of France’s war in Mali, where France maintains a heavy military presence along with the UN forces. In recent weeks, French and UN forces have launched large-scale operations in Northern Mali, ostensibly aimed at crushing “terrorist movements.”

Witnesses said a French military helicopter flew above the area after the journalists were kidnapped. Amid some reports of a possible friendly-fire accident, the French presidency told RFI that “authorisation to use force was neither requested nor granted.”

On November 6, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for the killings. In a statement published by Mauritanian news agency Sahara Media, AQIM said Dupont and Verlon were killed in retaliation for “crimes perpetrated by France and its UN, Malian and African allies.”

These sources could not be fully verified, however. On Thursday, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said only, “We’re in the process of verifying it, but it seems plausible.”

The killing of the journalists came just days after the

liberation of four French hostages, who had been held by AQIM for three years, in neighbouring Niger. Although Paris denied it had paid a ransom, French media reported that as much as €20 million (US\$26.7 million) exchanged hands.

Paris responded to the killing of journalists by moving some 150 French troops from southern Mali to Kidal. France has deployed about 3,200 troops in Mali since the Hollande government launched its military intervention in early January.

More broadly, it is using the incident to slow the scheduled reduction of French troops deployed in Mali. “Recent incidents do not call into question the overall schedule to reduce the presence of French forces,” Fabius told RFI in an interview.

In fact, Paris has already delayed by two months plans to reduce troop numbers from 3,200 to 1,000 by the end of the year, however. Despite cynical promises to reduce troop levels, French troops are being deployed permanently, playing the dominant role in the UN military mission known as MINUSMA, which will take over with an increase of some 12,600 troops in the region.

Last week, the Netherlands pledged to send combat helicopters and around 380 troops to boost the UN mission in Mali.

The abduction and murder of the two RFI journalists is deeply reactionary and has provoked horror and sadness in France. Should it be confirmed that AQIM forces carried out the murder, it would further underscore the reactionary character of Al Qaeda, which Paris has worked with extensively in its wars in Libya and Syria. Islamist militias backed by US, French, and NATO war planes and Special Forces provided the key ground forces to destroy the regime of Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Paris' collaboration with Al Qaeda in Libya underscores that the main political responsibility for the deaths of Dupont and Verlon lies not with the various militias and criminal gangs linked to AQIM, but with the French government.

The Mali war is inseparably connected to the 2011 NATO war against Libya, in which Paris worked closely with Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces. Paris launched its military intervention in January into Mali, a former French colony, to prop up the unpopular military junta regime in Bamako after rebel forces had taken over large swaths of Northern Mali in early 2012, prompting a military coup in the capital.

The military, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré ahead of presidential elections in April 2012. The army accused Touré of failing to deal effectively with Tuareg militias, who had been supplied with arms in large part by Libyan Islamist forces who had pillaged Libyan government weapons supplies after NATO destroyed the Gaddafi regime.

Hollande responded by launching a war in Mali only half a year after coming to power. This decision highlighted the increasing recklessness of French imperialism's military policy across Africa and the Middle East. Paris compounded its criminality by subsequently relying on similar Al Qaeda-linked forces in the NATO-led proxy war in Syria.

The French intervention in Mali is a politically criminal war, combining the pursuit of French imperialism's strategic and resource interests in Africa with a political conspiracy aimed at deepening social attacks on the working class at home. French officials and journalists made clear in repeated statements that its purpose was to shift the political atmosphere in France far to the right, permitting Hollande to move ahead with unpopular attacks on the working class.

When the war was launched, French officials and media compared the Mali war with the 1982 Falkland Islands war launched by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. News magazine *Le Point* reported, "At the Elysée [presidential palace], Hollande's advisers are dreaming, as one of them said, of a 'Falklands effect.'" *Le Point* journalist Anna Cabana explained the content of this strategy explained to her by Hollande's advisers: "When the Argentine troops landed on the Falklands in 1982, Margaret Thatcher

decided to reply militarily. The Iron Lady [Margaret Thatcher], deeply unpopular at the time due to her drastic free-market reform policies, embarked Britain on a military adventure that ensured her re-election in 1983."

After winning re-election victory in 1983, Thatcher deepened her social attacks on the working class. With the help of the British unions, the Thatcher government defeated the miners' strike in 1985—during which some 20,000 miners were injured, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, nearly 1,000 summarily sacked, and two killed on the picket lines. She proceeded to impose a devastating policy of de-industrialization and financialization, shutting down industries and destroying thousands of jobs.

The Hollande administration's comments that it is modeling its policy on that of Thatcher testifies to the political criminality of Hollande's Socialist Party (PS) and the entire media and political establishment, who have not challenged this policy.

Having made itself deeply unpopular by its attacks on jobs and social spending, Hollande is trying to rally support by engaging in escalating military adventures abroad, hoping to give himself a boost to proceed with even deeper social attacks.

One could hardly expect a more devastating exposure of the bankruptcy of capitalism in Europe. Driven by social contradictions for which it has no solution, Paris is trying to solve its domestic problems through military adventurism and aggression.



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