French troops intervene in Central African Republic, seize Bangui

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France deployed troops to the Central African Republic (CAR) this weekend, after the UN Security Council adopted a France-sponsored resolution on December 5 authorising French and African intervention. They ostensibly aim to halt ongoing sectarian violence between majority Christian and minority Muslims that has escalated since France backed a coup against President François Bozizé earlier this year by Muslim Seleka rebels.

French forces, backed by tanks, helicopters and warplanes, deployed throughout the capital, Bangui, on Saturday. They also started deploying to the north and west of the country to seize key roads; pre-positioned troops crossed the border from Cameroon into the west of the Central African Republic.

The French government plans to maintain 1,600 troops in its former colony indefinitely. At a press conference closing a two-day Africa-France summit at the Elysée Presidential Palace on Saturday, French President François Hollande said that he would increase French troop levels in CAR to 1,600—400 more troops than what was announced last week.

Hollande said, “Thursday there were 600 troops, [Friday] night there were 1,000, and tonight there will be 1,600 and that level will be maintained as long as necessary for this mission.”

French forces in CAR will be working with a 2,500-strong African-Union force, which will also be boosted to 6,000.

France’s political establishment and corporate media are backing the military intervention, falsely arguing that Paris’ intervention in CAR has nothing to do with its strategic interests and is a humanitarian operation. Hollande vowed that his aim was to “prevent a humanitarian catastrophe,” after 300 civilians were reportedly killed in three days as a result of sectarian clashes in CAR.

In its Saturday editorial, *Le Monde* praised the military intervention as a humanitarian operation, writing: “France’s publicly stated goals, i.e. aiding to secure the country and allowing humanitarian aid to reach it, are beyond doubt.”

It added, “The former colonial power stresses today that it does not want to be directly involved in the political settlement of this crisis. France wants as quickly as possible to bring in the UN, whose actions in recent years in CAR have not been particularly well chosen.”

Such comments reek of cynicism and bad faith. France’s seizure of Bangui and of CAR will not soften but intensify the country’s ethno-sectarian divisions and conflicts—as did the NATO war in Libya and France’s intervention in Ivory Coast, which were similarly peddled to the public in 2011 as “humanitarian” exercises.

Paris bears the main responsibility for the current bloodshed in CAR. It has backed a series of military coups in CAR since the country’s independence, in order to install various reactionary proxy governments in power.

Now, French imperialism is pursuing an explosive neo-colonial policy of militarily toppling governments in its former African colonies—such as in the Ivory Coast or CAR—that have developed closer ties to China.

Before Bozizé was ousted, ties between CAR and China had been developing rapidly with initiatives on economy, trade, culture, education and health. The CAR also discussed expanding military ties with China while senior Chinese officials visited the CAR in June 2012.

Relations between Paris and Bangui deteriorated

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under Bozizé as he adopted a more pro-Chinese line, signing military and economic deals with Beijing. Paris was concerned over untapped natural resources in CAR including diamonds, gold, uranium, timber and oil that French corporations could lose to their Chinese competitors, and also the broader implications of China's rising influence in the former French colonial empire.

Before Seleka took power, Bozizé suggested in a speech given on December 27, 2012 that rebel forces were attacking him because he decided to grant oil exploration contracts to a Chinese firm.

He asked, "What mistake did I make? There are no political prisoners at the moment, the press is free. Why did they start raping, killing and hurting the Central African population? … We gave them everything. Before giving oil to the Chinese, I met Total in Paris and told them to take the oil; nothing happened. I gave oil to the Chinese and it became a problem. I sent counselor Maidou in Paris for the Uranium dossier, they refused. I finally gave it to the South Africans."

Now, France is building up not only its own military forces, but also local proxy forces across Africa, in preparation for broader wars and neo-colonial interventions across the region.

As the current military intervention in CAR began, France hosted a two-day Africa-France summit titled "Peace and security in Africa" attended by 53 African heads of state, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Noting that Franco-African relations "can no longer be what they could be in the past," Hollande vowed to support "the creation of a rapid reaction force controlled by the African Union." He declared that France would provide training for 20,000 African troops for five years.

French imperialism, under the UN mandate, plays a key role in pursuing its policy in the continent. The military intervention in CAR follows French intervention in Mali early this year.

France has deployed about 7,500 troops across the world, according to the Defence Ministry. It currently has more than 5,000 troops stationed at bases across Africa. The cost of maintaining them amounts to €400 million per year.

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