

After Paris attacks, Spain offers to reinforce French troops in Africa

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Last Thursday, the Spanish daily *El País* reported that Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy has offered to replace French troops deployed in missions in Africa so Paris can free up more forces for the fight against Islamic State (IS), both in France itself and in Syria and Iraq. The plan would most likely involve Spain sending forces to countries where France already has troops, specifically Mali and the Central African Republic.

Using the pretext of the ISIS-led suicide attacks in Paris that killed 130 people, Madrid is cynically trying to convince France that its imperialist interests lie in the Middle East in order to strengthen Spain's influence in Africa.

On Thursday, Spanish foreign minister José Manuel García Margallo cited such a mission in Africa, first in a business forum and later in the evening in a TV interview. He said, "Spain can do many things. It can stand in for the efforts being made by France in Mali and Central Africa, so they can free up soldiers and materiel and send them to Syria, and we would cover for them."

France has military forces deployed in five of its former colonies in Africa's Sahel region—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—involving a force of 3,000 French troops. It also has had troops in the Central African Republic since 2013.

Under the cover of last Friday's attacks in Paris, France's imperialist rivals are positioning themselves to muscle in on France's neo-colonial operations in Africa. The US is constantly broadening the scope of its military presence in Africa, whilst Germany is advancing its ambitions on the continent. German defence minister Ursula Von der Leyen has announced that the German army is planning a combat mission to Mali.

Amid explosive social conditions in Spain, with

youth unemployment rates at 56 percent, Madrid aims to regain influence in the continent through military interventions and the use of proxy forces. Spanish business and military circles hope to profit from the region's energy resources, while channeling social tensions towards militarism and war.

Last year, Prime Minister Rajoy toured the region to strike major business deals, announcing that Spain's trade with Africa had outstripped that with South America. Soon after, Defence Minister Pedro Morenés toured several African countries and called for a more aggressive NATO intervention, complaining of divisions among the imperialist powers in the region, while Margallo said that Africa is "of extraordinary importance for Spain."

This was accompanied by a vast increase in military spending reaching €17 billion this year, according to the peace foundation Centre Delàs, and military deployments on the continent that increased several-fold.

Since 2013, Spain has been involved in European Union (EU) military missions and has supported French and US imperialist interventions on the continent. There are currently around 1,000 soldiers in 10 land, air and naval missions on African soil.

Madrid is also propping Washington's geo-strategic interests and ambitions on the continent, having signed this year a new bilateral defence agreement to allow the US military permanent use of the Morón air base in Seville. It will allow Washington to deploy up to 3,000 soldiers and 36 aircraft in the base. It will become the house of the Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response-Africa, subordinated to the US Africa Command (AFRICOM).

Spanish imperialism's drive to join the scramble for Africa was reflected in a series of studies published in

the major Spanish think tanks, the publicly financed Instituto Elcano, and the Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos (Strategic Studies Group, GEE), the Popular Party-aligned think-tank.

Last year, the Instituto Elcano published “Spain Looking South: From the Mediterranean to the Sahel,” declaring Spain’s “pivot to the South has been justified on the basis of the risks that dominate the region. However, we should debate how to take advantage of economic opportunities in this turn.” It short-listed the abundant mineral, oil and other resources on the continent, lamenting Spain’s “precarious” position, with only 1.5 percent of its exports and 3.7 percent of its imports coming from sub-Saharan Africa.

The document concluded calling for Spain to stop acting in Africa within the framework of “other actors” such as NATO, the EU or France, and establish “its own network of influence, both in the civil and the military plane.”

A week after the attacks in Paris, the GEE published “Europe After the Paris Attacks: the Adequate Response Against ISIS”, calling for an increase in military expenditure, attack on democratic rights and more police-state measures—a “Spanish version of the US Patriot Act”. Along with these recipes, it recommended that the Spanish government increase its troops in the North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and get involved militarily in Syria.

One point, under the sub-title “Intensifying the Spanish mission in the Sahel,” explained that “Spain has an essential interest in maintaining military ties with France in Africa at this time.... Spain has to take a more pro-active attitude, without waiting for a French request to get involved in Mali, the African Central Republic and Senegal.”

About one hour after the start of the terror attack in a hotel in the Malian capital of Bamako on Friday, Madrid released a statement denying reports that the government had discussed the possibility of sending troops, contradicting the public announcements made by Foreign Minister Margallo on television. The statement claimed that Spain had made no unilateral offer to France and that the anti-ISIS coalition had requested no military contribution from Spain.

In view of this coincidence in timing between the announcement of the possible deployment and the attacks in Mali, the Spanish government clearly got a

case of cold feet and sought to backtrack on effectively going to war in Africa just weeks before national elections. Margallo then claimed that sending troops should wait until after the elections.

The reactions of the other major parties underscore the broad consensus in favor of neo-colonial war in the ruling class. The leader of Spain’s Socialist Party, Pedro Sánchez, took a strong stance in favour of some form of intervention in support of France, saying that Spain could not just “stand idly by”, but shared the government’s backtrack, demanding a postponement of any decision until after the elections. For Sánchez, such an intervention would be legitimate if sanctioned by the UN Security Council.

Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias offered only tactical criticism of the rush to war, saying that decisions on war should not be made in the “heat of the moment.”



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