

German military to station Heron drones in Mali

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The German military will soon station combat drones in Mali. Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) made the announcement during her April 5 visit to troops in the West African country.

According to media reports, two to three Heron drones will be transferred to the city of Gao by the end of the year. 227 German soldiers have already been stationed there since the beginning of February. In the next week, they will be joined by 200 more. According to von der Leyen, the large drones will be used to monitor virtually the entire conflict-ridden northern part of the country, including several hundred kilometer-long roads between cities.

“Here is the situation in this desert region: Whoever controls the roads can grant access to a city or cut it off from supplies,” explained von der Leyen in Gao. Because of this, she continued, it is important to be able to survey this large region. She added, “We are therefore planning to deploy the Heron 1 here toward the end of the year.”

The defense minister’s announcement exposes the public assurances made by the German government that the intervention in Mali is not a combat mission, but a “peacekeeping and reconnaissance mission.”

The exact opposite is obviously the case. Until now, the German military has only used Heron drones, manufactured in Israel and equipped with missiles, in Afghanistan where German “peacekeeping” troops fought a bloody combat mission alongside the United States over the course of several years. As in Afghanistan, the German military will not bring “stability” and “peace” to Mali, but only more chaos and terror.

The Tuesday evening news shows broadcast images of German soldiers armed to the teeth as they combed

through the cities and villages of Northern Mali on foot and with armored scout vehicles. The commentators on broadcaster ARD’s *Tagesschau* discussed the potential security crisis of a mission which could drag on “several years or even decades” and expressed concerns about a “new Afghanistan.”

Also on Tuesday, von der Leyen explained in a statement to the German-Dutch “Camp Castor” in Gao: “It is the most dangerous UN mission that Germany has at the moment, because there are two bitter enemies.” There are the “criminal networks” that live off smuggling weapons, drugs and people, and there are the “Jihadists” in the North of the country.

On Monday, von der Leyen further justified the German intervention during a meeting with her Malian counterpart Tiéman Hubert Coulibaly in the capital city of Bamako, again calling it a “struggle against the reasons for flight.” She said, “The more stable it is in this part of the West African region, the better we can successfully eliminate together the root causes for illegal migration.” The lesson of the past year was to “restore peace locally” in conflicts, or else they would spread and become global problems which sent people fleeing from war and conflict.”

This argument is as cynical as it is transparent. Von der Leyen’s statements, like all official propaganda, conceal that, above all, the militarist policies of the West are the reasons for war, refugees and conflicts. Mali is the best example. The country was first destabilized by the Nato war against Libya in 2011 and then plunged into chaos. As a consequence of the destruction of Libya, an influx of weapons and militants made their way to Mali, the Tuareg militias were created and Islamist forces launched an uprising in northern Mali against the central government in Bamako at the beginning of 2012.

As the official Malian army stood at the brink of dissolution after heavy fighting and a military coup in March 2012, France, the former colonial power, intervened at the beginning of 2013 to reconquer the resource-rich north of the country. The mission was sold as an anti-terror operation. In reality, it was part of the new scramble for Africa by the imperialist powers.

Unlike the Nato bombing of Libya, the German military was involved from the beginning and supported the French intervention with logistics and personnel. Since then, Berlin has worked systematically to increase Germany's contribution. While the German military was initially "only" involved in a so-called training mission of the EU (EUTM) in the relatively peaceful south, the new combat troops are part of UN mission Minusma, in which 70 soldiers have been killed during the last three years.

According to a report in the *Bundeswehr aktuell*, the official newspaper of the German army, the EUTM mission will now also be expanded to northern Mali and a large part of the Sahel region. This was decided by the Council of the European Union last week. *Bundeswehr aktuell* reports: "In addition to an extension of the mission until May 18, 2018, the Council decided on an expansion of the mission's operational area. The mission area will soon reach the bend of the Niger River, including the cities Gao and Timbuktu."

The report continues: "To facilitate the rebuilding of Malian armed forces, the mission may in the future develop units incorporating former members of armed groups. To improve the interoperability and cooperation of armed forces of the G5 Sahel nations, the mission will include unified training activities." The G5 Sahel is an association of five African countries, including Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.

The extension of the German combat mission has long been planned and is part of Germany's return to an aggressive foreign policy and great power politics. Speaking on behalf of the German government, Norbert Röttgen, the chair of the German parliament's committee on foreign affairs, recently told *Tagesspiegel* that Germany "must intervene more strongly than before in international conflicts and fight the root causes of violence." Berlin must "strengthen its diplomatic initiatives and enlarge the military

component."

Just a glance at the official web site of the Foreign Ministry reveals the imperialist interests concealed behind Röttgen's propaganda phrases about "combatting violence." In the "country information" section on Mali, it explains that the West African country is "increasingly oriented toward a market economy" and taking steps toward "the privatization of state owned businesses, although not without difficulties." It adds, "The volume of foreign direct investment in Mali," is, however, "as before below Mali's economic potential."

The "raw material reserves in the country, including gold, lime, phosphates, diamonds and marble" were "at present still barely exploited." It continues: "Increased revenues through exploration of the hoped-for deposits of oil and phosphates in the north appear possible only in the mid-term in light of open questions regarding support and transportation infrastructure and the current security situation."

The German government is apparently now seeking to change this through the reinforcement of the German military and drone operations in the North. "The military is here because we are firmly convinced that Mali is a key nation in West Africa and that it makes an enormous difference whether Mali demonstrates stability [...] and can create permanently stable conditions," von der Leyen explained in the manner of a colonial ruler.

Niels Annen, the foreign policy spokesperson for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) justified the combat mission at the end of January with these words: "If one looks at the trade routes through the Sahel region and Sahara, one quickly realizes how strategically important the north of Mali is for the entire region."



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