Canada to wage war in Africa

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21 July 2016

Speaking just days after Canada pledged to command and organize a 1,000-strong NATO combat force in Latvia, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan insisted that Canada's leading role in the US-led alliance's military build-up against Russia will not prevent it from deploying forces to Africa.

Sajjan told a July 13 press briefing that a military intervention in Africa would be a "risky venture," but then committed the Liberal government to announcing a deployment to an unspecified African country in the coming weeks.

"We will be moving ahead on this," said Sajjan, "because it is extremely important to send a message to our multilateral partners that Canada will play a responsible role in the world."

Sajjan's comments were backed up by General Jonathan Vance, the Chief of the Defence Staff, the next day. Speaking at the investiture of a new army commander, Vance summarized the rapidly expanding list of overseas Canadian operations, declaring, "Internationally, the army is at the forefront, managing conflicts around the world, contributing to operations in Iraq, building capacity with allies and partners in Poland, Ukraine, and very soon in Africa."

According to press reports, the Canadian Armed Forces' Africa deployment could involve up to a 1,000 troops and will include a contingent of CF-18 fighter jets.

There has been no official confirmation of the destination of the troops, but it is widely anticipated they will be sent to Mali, where French imperialism has been waging a counter-insurgency war against anti-government rebels since 2013. Also reportedly under consideration is the Central African Republic (CAR). Like Mali, the CAR is a former French colony which has been convulsed in recent years by violent sectarian conflict.

Currently, 13,000 troops have been deployed to Mali and 12,000 to CAR under the banner of the United Nations. Most of these troops are drawn from neighboring African countries, however both interventions are effectively led by the French with, in the case of Mali, support from the German and Dutch militaries.

In late June, the Security Council agreed to increase the UN troop contingent in Mali by 2,500.

The Trudeau government, with the support of the media, is casting the Canadian military's impending African intervention as a "peacekeeping" mission aimed at protecting the local population from various Islamist militias, re-engaging with the United Nations and strengthening Canada's commitment to "humanitarian" goals. Speaking at the UN last March, Trudeau proclaimed, "Canada will increase its engagement with peace operations, not just by making available our military, police, and specialized expertise, but also by supporting the civilian institutions that prevent conflict, bring stability to fragile states, and help societies recover in the aftermath of crisis."

This is all hogwash. Since coming to power late last year, Trudeau and his Liberals have pursued an aggressive, militarist foreign policy aimed at asserting the predatory interests of the Canadian ruling class. The new government has made good on its election pledge to deepen Canada's longstanding military-strategic partnership with the US, the most aggressive imperialist power on the planet. In less than a year, Trudeau has tripled the number of Special Forces personnel active on the frontlines in the Mideast war in Iraq, given his backing to Washington's and Japan's stridently anti-Chinese stance over the South China Sea conflict and agreed to dispatch 450 troops, a frigate and six fighter jets to Europe to join the war drive against Russia.

While expanding Canada's participation in Washington's three principal military-strategic offensives—in the oil-rich Middle East and against Russia and China—the Trudeau Liberals have shunned the bellicose rhetoric of their Conservative predecessors. In contrast with Stephen Harper, who celebrated Canada as a nation of "warriors," Trudeau has resurrected the lie that Canada's foreign policy is motivated by humanitarian ideals and the canard that Canada's military has a vocation for "peacekeeping." Through this propaganda, the government aims to camouflage its aggressive foreign policy and rally popular support for employing the CAF to intervene around the world, hiking military spending, and procuring new warplanes, battleships, drones and other advanced weapons.

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The government's own document for the "defence policy review" it launched in April admits as much, noting that, "peace support missions are increasingly deployed to hostile environments where violence is systemic … Unlike 'traditional' peacekeeping missions of the past, most current missions operate where there is no clear peace accord to be monitored." The missions, adds the document, are moreover frequently "authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, thereby allowing use of force."

Even neo-conservative commentators, who are critical of the Trudeau government's peacekeeping rhetoric because they believe it constitutes an obstacle to Canada playing a frontline role in support of US imperialism, have been compelled to acknowledge that the "peacekeeping" label is misleading and that the upcoming CAF intervention in Africa will be a war in all but name.

The *National Post's* Matthew Fisher compared the coming African deployment to Canada's involvement in the Afghan war, where the CAF played a pivotal role in supporting the US-led neo-colonial occupation by leading counter-insurgency operations in Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. One hundred fifty-eight Canadian troops lost their lives in Afghanistan and thousands of others were either wounded or psychologically traumatized.

Noting that in 2005-2006, Defence Minister Bill Graham and the military's top commander, Gen. Rick Hillier, toured the country to prepare "Canadians for the likelihood of casualties" in Afghanistan, Fisher called on Sajjan and Vance to "in the same way now prepare Canadians for the dangerous slog ahead in Africa."

In an editorial last Thursday, the *Globe and Mail* agreed with Fisher's assessment, stating that the coming African intervention "could prove to be no easier than Canada's difficult, deadly experience in Afghanistan."

According to Fisher, West Africa has become "a terrifying place, with Islamic terrorists flooding south across the Sahara from the chaos of Libya to cause mayhem, anarchy and despair in half a dozen impoverished countries."

This self-serving "war on terror" narrative carefully omits mention of precisely what caused the "chaos of Libya," as Fisher puts it. The country was plunged into sectarian conflict by the 2011 US-led NATO "regime change" war in which Canada played a prominent role. NATO air strikes killed thousands, laid waste to much of the country's infrastructure, and were coordinated with and bolstered the very extremist, Islamist forces against whom the Liberals and the media now claim Canadian troops must be mobilized to fight.

Fisher, to say nothing of Trudeau and his Liberals, also avoids any reference to Africa's brutal colonial past, which remains the chief reason for the mass poverty and misery which continues to blight the West Africa region and much of the rest of the continent. The period of direct colonial rule was followed by ruthless neo-colonial domination and the enforcement of IMF restructuring programs aimed at slashing social spending and boosting investor profits.

The reality is that the Trudeau government's military intervention in Africa is being driven by geopolitical and economic interests. An operation in West Africa would help strengthen Canada's cooperation with French imperialism, a key NATO ally with thousands of troops in the region. As early as 2013, the Harper government aided Paris by airlifting troops and military equipment to Mali, and this was repeated by the Trudeau government at the end of last year for France's Operation Barkhane. This mission stretches across Paris's former colonial possessions, from Mali in West Africa to Chad in the center of the continent.

In May, Foreign Minister Stephane Dion travelled to Tunisia to proclaim his support for the government and unveil a security agreement between the two countries that will facilitate the training of Tunisian security forces on the border with Libya. This deal could help pave the way for a Canadian military deployment to Libya, which has Africa's largest oil reserves, should the European powers act on their long-discussed plans to mount a new military intervention there.

Canadian troops have considerable experience operating on the African continent. As well as their role in Libya, Canadian troops began in 2011 to participate in the US-led Operation Flintlock in West Africa. The annual military exercise involves special forces from Mali, Nigeria, Mauritania, Niger and neighbouring countries.

Canadian corporations have substantial investments in Africa, investing more than $25 billion in mining operations across the continent. In Burkina Faso, where a terrorist attack in January by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was seized upon by Canada's ruling elite to step up pressure for a military deployment to the region, Canadian companies control three of the country's five biggest mines and have invested $1.6 billion. Canadian-based Iamgold is one of the two principal investors in Mali's largest gold mine.

In 2014, the Harper government named Burkina Faso and Mali as "priority countries" for Canada, meaning that they offered considerable potential for business investments and should be a focus of Canada's foreign policy.

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