

Canadian Armed Forces' document calls for "heavier weapons" to confront child soldiers in Africa

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A Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) directive, published at the beginning of the month, calls on the military to better prepare personnel—both psychologically and in terms of equipment—to confront child soldiers. The paper has been prepared as Canada's Liberal government prepares to send hundreds of troops to Africa to participate in counter-insurgency operations.

The "joint doctrine note," drafted in collaboration with Roméo Dallaire, a retired CAF Lieutenant-General and well-known proponent of "humanitarian" military interventions who served in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, is the first time the Canadian military has produced a document specifically outlining strategic guidelines concerning child soldiers.

The document begins by warning that "Encounters with child soldiers during operations can have significant psychological impacts for the personnel involved" and that Canadian soldiers "must be prepared for the possibility they will have to engage child soldiers with deadly force to defend themselves or others," i.e. to kill them.

The directive then explains that troops are likely to face child soldiers "on an increasing basis" in future UN or NATO-led missions. Human Rights Watch estimates that more than 300,000 child soldiers—recruited as suicide bombers, fighters, spies, manual labourers or sex slaves—are involved in conflicts around the world. They are widely used in African countries such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Congo, Sudan, Somalia and Mali.

In the case of Mali, the children's rights group Humanium reported in 2014 that children make up more than half of the country's population and that "their recruitment has been coupled with the destruction and closure of schools" resulting from the bloody war that has raged in the country between Islamist forces and the US and French-backed Malian government since 2012.

But the directive argues the Canadian Army should not be disturbed by such a reality and, on the contrary, should

respond with more brutality. Dallaire declared, "These kids are under duress, a lot of them are drugged up, a lot of them are indoctrinated ... You may in certain circumstances still have to use lethal force." Dallaire went on to say, "Pulling away ... has been so much the norm and gives the advantage to the guy who is recruiting these kids."

The document also underlines that if soldiers are not sufficiently armed they could be vulnerable to "human wave attacks" using child soldiers, i.e. frontal assaults where the target is overrun. It therefore concludes that "consideration should be given" to providing Canadian troops with "heavier," i.e. more deadly, weapons.

The doctrine says child soldiers taken prisoner should be handled differently from adult combatants, such as by placing "greater focus on rehabilitation." The real concern of the ruling class and the military brass, however, is not the fate of the child soldiers, but the potential loss of Western troops and fears that the Canadian military's implication in atrocities will fuel antiwar sentiment at home.

"What caught a lot of these guys by surprise—the Dutch, the Germans and the Italians and the Chadians—in Mali was they were facing these Boko Haram kids and they didn't know what the hell to do," said Dallaire.

As Shelly Whitman, executive director of the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, told the *Globe and Mail*, South African soldiers deployed to the Central African Republic a few years ago "were not at all prepared for the fact they were facing a field full of children." They lost 16 soldiers, said Whitman, "because they were not mentally prepared for that."

While government officials have not yet confirmed where the next Canadian deployment to Africa will be, Mali is high on the list of potential locations. France has been pressuring Canada for military support in Western Africa, including in Mali, where France, the United States and Germany are seeking to eradicate Islamist rebels they themselves armed and financed back in 2011 to oust Muammar Gaddafi in

Libya.

The UN had held open command of its “peacekeeping mission” in Mali for a Canadian officer, but the UN planners, impatient and uncertain about Canada’s involvement, recently announced that Maj.-Gen. Jean-Paul Deconinck of Belgium will take over.

Canadian Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has made two separate trips to Mali in the last year. An anonymous source recently told the *Toronto Star* that personnel from the Defence Department and Global Affairs Canada have made “non-stop” visits to the African country in recent months. The most recent visit came several weeks ago when officials attached to the newly formed Peace and Stabilization Operations Program in Global Affairs Canada spent several days in Bamako.

One of the reasons for the delay in finalizing a new Canadian military intervention in Africa is that the Trudeau government wanted to make sure the Trump administration approved of the deployment. According to the *Globe and Mail*, the Trump administration has now given the “green light” to Canada to dispatch troops to Mali. However, the Trudeau government, which seeks to camouflage an aggressive imperialist foreign policy in “humanitarian” rhetoric, has become concerned that the CAF’s implication in atrocities that involve children will alienate the population, expose the real, imperialist character of such “peace-keeping” missions, and undermine it plans to hike overall Canadian military spending.

As the CAF directive notes, if an engagement with child soldiers “is not well-handled, and communicated effectively, there is strong potential for significant negative impact on the mission, locally, in Canada, and at the international level.”

The Liberals are also concerned over how to sell to the public a combat mission that will likely involve a high number of civilian and Canadian casualties—more than 110 UN “peacekeeping” troops have been killed in Mali during the past four years—and one that is likely to prove only the prelude to a far broader military adventure across the region.

The intervention in Mali, where 13,000 troops and 2,000 police from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and various other countries are active, is being conducted under the United Nations umbrella. But it is also part of the broader French-led Operation Barkhane, which includes missions in Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger.

Although the various African missions, whether under the banner of the UN, France, or the US-led AFRICOM, are presented as counter-terrorism or even peace-keeping missions, they are part of a new scramble for Africa, in which the major powers are seeking to gain control over resources, markets and strategic countries.

Canadian imperialism is determined to have its share of the spoils. Canadian businesses, most of all the mining companies, have billions of dollars in investment throughout Africa and are eager to see the CAF increase its presence on the continent. The Canadian Army has been increasingly involved in West Africa. In 2011, Canadian Special Forces began attending the annual US-led Operation Flintlock exercise in West Africa, which brings together Special Forces from a number of neighbouring countries to undergo training.

When France sent troops to Mali in 2013, Canadian military transport planes were sent to ferry in French weaponry and supplies. The Liberal government agreed to similar assistance following its election in 2015.

A small contingent of 25 Canadian soldiers of the 1st Battalion, Royal 22nd Regiment, based in the French-speaking province of Quebec, will soon take part in a revamped Canadian Armed Forces’ mission to train security forces in Niger, which shares a border with Mali. These new forces will take over from an ongoing deployment, known as Operation Naberius, that was kept secret for almost three years and involved Canadian Special Forces providing similar training.

To fund increased military deployments, the Trudeau government is significantly hiking military spending. In its first budget it maintained the commitment of its Conservative predecessors to increase defence spending by 3 percent annually for a decade. More recently, it has repeatedly signaled, including in Wednesday’s budget, that bigger increases, aimed at moving Canada far closer to the NATO goal of a military budget equivalent to at least 2 percent of GDP, will be announced once the Liberals complete a year-long “defence policy review.”



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