Canada deploys “peacekeepers” to wage war in Mali

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Canada’s Liberal government announced Monday that it is deploying up to 250 troops and six military helicopters to the West African country of Mali.

Although the mission is being promoted by the government and corporate media as a “peacekeeping” mission, the reality is the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) will be participating in a neo-colonial, counter-insurgency war in Mali, and with the aim of advancing Canadian imperialism’s predatory interests on the African continent. Canadian mining companies have more than $1 billion invested in Mali and according to a 2014 estimate, more than $30 billion invested across Africa.

At their Monday press conference, Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland and Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan said the CAF “air task force” will deploy to Mali by no later than August, replacing a German contingent that is currently leading the United Nations’ mission in Mali.

In remarks to the CBC, Sajjan had to concede that the troops deployed to Mali will be providing logistical support to combatants and themselves engaging in combat. “This is not the peacekeeping of the past,” said Canada’s defence minister. He emphasized that the two CAF armoured transport helicopters likely to be deployed will be supported by four Griffin attack helicopters and will be empowered to use lethal force when needed.

The UN forces in Mali engage in combat on a regular basis, with several “peacekeepers” dying every month. There have been over 160 fatalities among UN “peacekeepers” since the mission was launched in 2013.

Chief of Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance said the number of Canadian troops and helicopters to be deployed could change following consultations with Germany and the UN.

The UN Mali mission was launched in support of French imperialism’s intervention in the impoverished West African country to prop up the pro-western government in Bamako after it came under pressure from Tuareg separatist rebels in the country’s north.

The Tuareg rebellion was fuelled by longstanding grievances against the central government in the south and an inflow of weapons and Islamist militants in the aftermath of NATO’s bloody intervention in nearby Libya to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi—a regime-change war that was led by a Canadian general and in which Canadian fighter jets played a prominent role.

The French intervention shored up Mali’s central government, but armed anti-government groups remain active in as much as two-thirds of the country.

The Mali mission is part of a broader drive by the imperialist powers, especially France and Germany, to assert their interests and dominance across the mineral rich Sahel region. Paris, the former colonial power, has soldiers deployed in Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, and other countries as part of Operation Barkhane.

As well as having geostrategic significance, as the link between North and sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel has large deposits of gold, copper, phosphates and uranium.

The new scramble for Africa also includes US imperialism, which regularly conducts training exercises throughout the Sahel and over the past decade has developed a vast network of military bases across the continent, and increasingly China.

It raises the prospect of even more bloody conflicts over the impoverished continent’s rich resources—conflicts in which Canada will be involved.

Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government are well aware that to openly proclaim the real reasons why Canadian troops are being sent to Africa would provoke a public backlash.

In the 2015 election campaign, the Liberals sought to capitalize on popular opposition to war by calling for the withdrawal of Canadian fighter jets from the Middle East and an end to Canada’s “combat mission” in Iraq and Syria. After coming to power, they promptly reversed

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course and tripled the number of Special Forces troops involved in the latest US-led war in the world's most important oil-producing region.

This reversal is part of a policy of expanding Canada's role in US imperialism's major military-strategic offensives around the world. The Trudeau government has deployed troops to Latvia and CAF trainers to Ukraine, as part of the US-NATO military build-up on Russia's borders. It has also deployed naval vessels to the Asia Pacific, where Washington is threatening North Korea and China.

The timing of the Mali announcement is significant. In recent weeks, particularly since Trudeau's trip to India, where he was snubbed by New Delhi, the media and influential figures within the ruling elite have sharply criticized the government for reputedly failing to implement major promised policy changes. These include the privatization of infrastructure, new pipelines to take Alberta tar sands oil to tidewater, and the procurement of new fighter jets and battleships.

The government has also come under fire for failing to make good on its pledge to make a significant contribution to UN "peacekeeping." France, Germany and the EU have long been pressing Canada to deploy forces to Mali, but until this week the government had balked, out of fear of a hostile public reaction were Canadian troops killed or involved in atrocities, such as waging war on child soldiers.

Nevertheless, the government has been anxious to associate itself with UN peacekeeping, including hosting a major conference on the subject in Vancouver last November. This is because it believes Canada's return to UN peacekeeping will help it win a UN Security Council seat in 2020 and, more importantly, provide it political cover for an aggressive militarist foreign policy.

Last June, the Liberals announced a 70 percent hike in military spending over the coming decade as part of their new defence policy. In her keynote address accompanying the policy's release, Freeland declared that "hard power," i.e. war, must be a central tool of Ottawa's foreign policy, just as it was in the last century in which Canada was a major belligerent in both world wars.

Participation in UN "peacekeeping" missions was always a means by which the Canadian ruling elite sought to advance its imperialist interests and those of its NATO allies, above all the US. Lester Pearson, who is publicly celebrated as the founder of UN peacekeeping, played a major role in the establishment of both NATO and NORAD and supported the stationing of US nuclear missiles in Canada.

The CAF's deployment to Mali is part of the Trudeau Liberal government's resort to "hard power" to uphold the Canadian ruling elite's economic and strategic interests.

The opposition parties are fully on board with the government's aggressive foreign policy, though tactical differences exist over its implementation.

The Conservatives have criticized the government for labeling the Mali deployment as "peacekeeping," suggesting this could lead the CAF to accepting rules of engagement that are not sufficiently aggressive and put Canadian troops in "harm's way." Behind this stance lies the fear that "peacekeeping" in Africa could detract from Canada deepening its military-strategic alliance with its principal partner, Washington.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) supports the deployment and has in fact chided the Liberals for moving too slowly. Making clear its pro-imperialist credentials, which have seen the NDP abandon its nominal opposition to Canadian participation in NATO and back every Canadian military intervention since the bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, the NDP released a statement earlier this month on the "Liberal failure to contribute to peacekeeping missions."

"We condemn the Liberals' consistent failure to contribute to specific peacekeeping missions around the world," declared the statement, which was issued after it was revealed that Canada will not be sending security forces to Colombia to help police a truce between FARC guerrillas and the country's right-wing government. Offering its services to implement foreign military interventions more expeditiously, the NDP proclaimed the need for "urgent action on peacekeeping."

This stance underscores that if workers want to oppose war and imperialist violence, they can do so only in political struggle against the pro-capitalist NDP. Only the fight to mobilize the working class independently of all factions of the Canadian ruling class and on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program offers a viable way to oppose militarism and war.

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