

Forty-nine Malian soldiers dead in Islamic State attack, as protests grow against French-led war

Alex Lantier
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An attack last Friday on a Malian army outpost at Indelimane, near the border with Niger, killed 49 soldiers, as the seventh year of the French-led war in Mali was drawing to a close. This attack, one of the deadliest targeting the Malian army, makes clear that French imperialism has not succeeded in stabilizing the Malian government. Instead, it, along with its allies, has sunk into a bloody quagmire.

At about noon, the squad of 80 Malian troops posted at Indelimane came under mortar fire, followed by repeated attacks by gunmen riding on motorcycles. By the time Malian army reinforcements could arrive at Indelimane, later in the day, most of the soldiers were dead. A few dozen managed to flee, but the Malian army, which initially gave out a death toll of 53, indicated that several of its soldiers as well as weapons and equipment were still missing.

On Saturday, a French soldier of the 1st Spahi regiment based in Valence, Ronan Pointeau, was killed when his vehicle detonated a roadside bomb in the same area.

The attacks came amid an upsurge of protests against the military operations led by France, the former colonial power across the region, which are spreading from Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger.

The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for both attacks in communiqués posted on the Telegram app. “The soldiers of the caliphate have attacked a military base where elements of the apostate Malian army are posted in the village of Indelimane, in the region of Ménaka,” the IS wrote in the first communiqué, adding later, “The soldiers of the caliphate targeted a convoy of vehicles of French forces... near Indelimane in the Ménaka region by setting off an explosive device.”

Both communiqués were signed by the “West Africa Province” of the IS.

The latest attack on the Malian army comes just a month after two deadly attacks on Malian troops, in Boulkessi and Mondoro, in the south of the country near Burkina Faso, which claimed 40 lives.

The French media openly admit that Paris, its European allies in Mali led by Berlin, and the neo-colonial Malian regime are failing to stem a rising tide of armed opposition. Yvan Guichaoua, a lecturer at the University of Kent specializing in the Mali war, told Radio France Internationale (RFI): “We see not only a relatively technologically advanced character in these attacks, but also attacks that are mobilizing ever larger numbers of men, which shows that jihadist movements can recruit and maintain relatively large force sizes.”

Commenting on the Malian army, *Le Point* wrote: “Without French aerial support, it would usually confront enormous difficulties in the face of the increasingly daring operations of the jihadists. Despite their greater materiel, French units also face problems: the soldiers of Operation Barkhane usually intervene after the fact, in a hunt for terrorists who have melted away into the countryside... The enemy each time seems to have disappeared, regrouping only to undertake military action in order to avoid being located.”

If France and its allies are losing the war in Mali and the broader Sahel, it is above all because they are waging an unpopular, neo-colonial war of plunder, which aims primarily to secure French and European imperialist interests at the expense of their great-power rivals.

Paris launched the Mali war after the bloody 2011 NATO war against Libya, as Tuareg militias employed

by the Libyan regime destroyed by NATO fled across the Sahara desert into northern Mali. The war, facilitated by Algeria's decision to grant French bombers overflight rights from France over Algeria to Mali and back, barely halted a collapse of the Malian regime. By bombing and invading northern Mali, however, French forces only provoked rising opposition.

The region is strategic not only as a supplier of gold and other key raw materials, including uranium for French and European nuclear plants, but as a zone of increasing rivalry between America, China, Russia and the European powers. Berlin, which is aggressively remilitarizing its foreign policy in order to involve its army in deadly conflicts abroad, agreed to send its forces to Mali to back up the French war in 2016.

These deployments aim not only to plunder key strategic raw materials, but also to set up networks of concentration camps, like the ones in Libya and the Nigerien city of Agadez, to detain refugees and prevent them from fleeing to Europe.

Since the NATO war in Libya, there has been a rapid escalation in geostrategic rivalry in sub-Saharan Africa. Russia has signed contracts to train forces in the nearby Central African Republic and sell billions of dollars of weapons to Mali as well as Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Angola and Algeria. China is launching major infrastructure projects across Africa, including a railroad linking the Malian capital of Bamako to the Senegalese port of Dakar. It is also selling arms and cheap consumer goods.

Le Point wrote that these new powers, "pushing their weight around in the old backyards of the former colonial powers like France and Great Britain, also displease the United States, which is on the defensive... across the world and so in Africa as well."

But amid the growing geostrategic conflicts between the imperialist powers, Russia, China and various regional powers, there is at the same time a growing upsurge of protests by workers and oppressed people across the former French colonial empire. As mass strikes and protests like those of the "yellow vests" erupt in France and across Europe, the preconditions for the building of an international movement in the working class against the imperialist war in Mali and the broader Sahel are emerging.

In February, protests of youth and workers began to

demand the overthrow of the regime in Algeria. With its large population and strategically central position in western Africa, the Algerian regime is key to French attempts to dominate the region.

Increasingly, however, mass protests are erupting in countries across the Sahel to demand the withdrawal of French troops. They point to the collusion between France and the NATO powers with Al Qaeda in Syria and beyond to discredit the justifications for the war and raise questions about French complicity in attacks and ethnic massacres across the region.

In May, after a wave of attacks, thousands of youth marched in the Nigerian capital of Niamey to demand the withdrawal of French troops. They shouted slogans including, "Down with foreign military bases," "Down with the French army," "Down with the US army," "Down with the jihadists and Boko Haram" and "Our country is independent since August 3, 1960."

Last month, a protest took place in the Malian town of Sévaré, near Mopti, which torched the local offices of the UN mission in Mali (Minusma). The protesters submitted a petition to UN officials demanding the withdrawal of French and UN-sponsored troops from the region. They also chanted slogans, including "France leave our country," "Minusma out, Barkhane out, we've understood everything" and "Minusma is a terrorist base that gets money from the UN."

Protests also erupted in northern Burkina Faso, near the border with Mali, after a jihadist unit killed 16 people in the grand mosque of Salmossi. Afterwards, thousands demonstrated in the capital, Ouagadougou, shouting slogans such as "French army out of Burkina Faso" and "Foreign troops out of Africa" at an event billed as an "anti-imperialist day of action."



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