

UK deploys troops to Mali

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Around 300 British troops have arrived in the west African country of Mali. Presented as a contribution to the UN's peacekeeping mission, it is part of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's efforts to reassert British imperialism's interests in Africa against the challenge from its major rivals as the UK prepares to leave the European Union (EU).

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab sought to cover this blatant piece of imperialist militarism, declaring, "This new deployment of 300 British troops to the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali is part of our ongoing work in the Sahel region to build stability, improve the humanitarian response and help protect innocent civilians from violence."

While this is partly bound up with efforts to reduce migration to Europe, vital geo-strategic issues are also involved. First announced in July 2019 shortly after Johnson became prime minister, the deployment of troops to West Africa began earlier this year when around 30 soldiers and Royal Marines took part in training special forces from West African nations in a US-led "counter-terrorism" exercise in Senegal involving more than 1,600 troops. Major John House, commander of the Senegal team, declared it was in Britain's interests to get more involved in the region, saying, "If we don't act, we may find the problems getting closer to our door. The more they have a presence in the region, the more we can feel the effect back in the UK."

That exercise included special forces troops from Cameroon, Morocco and Nigeria that conducted a raid on a village to "take out" an unspecified group of extremists. Troops in Cameroon and Nigeria have been involved in such operations for years. Cameroon is suppressing an anglophone separatist movement and Nigeria is conducting operations against Boko Haram in the country's north east, as well as recurring conflicts in the country's Middle Belt and the oil-producing Niger Delta.

In July, small teams of Special Airforce Service, whose tasks include covert reconnaissance, counterterrorism, direct action, and hostage rescue, were reported to be in

Mali preparing for the main force of Light Dragoons and Royal Anglian troops to arrive later in the year.

UK forces were sent to Gao, in eastern Mali, where they will form part of Minusma, the UN's peacekeeping operation with 14,000 troops from 56 countries, in the vast desert and semi-arid region of the Sahel. According to the Ministry of Defence, their main task is to mount reconnaissance operations around Gao where several Islamist groups, including various al-Qaida affiliates under the banner of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and a rival Isis affiliate, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, are active.

The Minusma mission has been described as the most dangerous in the world. Last year, at least 500 civilians were killed by these groups that also attacked French, European, and local armed forces, with one suicide attack killing more than 50 Malians in a military base in 2017.

Earlier this year Mali witnessed months of protests against the French occupation, launched in 2013, and the ethnic massacres between rival militias that Paris tolerates, and uses to divide and rule the country. France intervened in Mali in January 2013 against separatist and Islamist forces who came from Libya in the aftermath of NATO's regime-change war in 2011. It has maintained more than 4,000 troops in Mali, increased to more than 5,100 since the beginning of 2020, as part of an international coalition that includes Germany, Canada, the US and the so-called G5 force of troops from Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Mali.

Mali is Africa's third-largest gold producer after Ghana, its southern neighbour, and South Africa. It also borders Niger, which hosts France's military forces including drone bases and provides most of the uranium supplies required for nuclear power production in France.

Despite its gold, Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 184 out of 188 on the United Nations Human Development Index, with 78 percent of the population living in poverty. The median age of its 19 million population is 16.3 years, many lacking access to education. Climate change is having a devastating impact

on Mali and the entire Sahel, where droughts and floods have obliterated crops and livestock herds, creating tension between farmers and nomadic herders competing for land and shrinking resources.

According to the United Nations, about 12.9 million people are affected by the crisis in Mali, with 6.8 million in need of humanitarian assistance. There are more than 250,000 internally displaced people as well as nearly 30,000 refugees from Burkina Faso and Niger. The insecurity in neighbouring Burkina Faso is forcing many Malian refugees to return home.

On August 18, amid mounting protests, a junta of Malian army colonels launched a pre-emptive coup, toppling President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and declaring loyalty to the French occupation force. France supported the coup because it was aimed against the anti-war protests of youth and workers. Like the 2012 coup that paved the way for the 2013 French invasion, the 2020 coup started in the Kita army base. General Ibrahim Dahirou Dembélé, who has been decorated for his services to French national security, was again one of its leaders.

When they took power, the coup leaders made their loyalty to French imperialism clear. They called on the Malian army to continue working with French troops (Operation Barkhane), their European allies (Takuba), their UN auxiliaries (Minusma), and their auxiliaries from the Sahel countries (G5 Sahel). They declared, “The Minusma, the Barkhane force, the G5 Sahel, the Takuba force are still our partners for stability and the restoration of security. We call on you, our brothers in arms, to continue discharging your law-and-order and operational missions.”

The Sahel, which includes the francophone countries of Mali, Burkino Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania, is not one of Britain’s traditional fields of operations. But Johnson is determined to recoup some of Britain’s lost influence in Africa, while embracing US imperialism and its militaristic agenda. This is centred on escalating aggression towards Russia and China, which has become Africa’s largest trading partner, as part of his efforts to salvage the UK’s global position, post-Brexit.

Operating under the UN mandate, British forces will not be involved in the EU operations in the Sahel, including the EU mission to train Mali’s police, although it does provide helicopter support for Operation Barkhane, France’s 5,000-strong anti-insurgency force, headquartered in N’Djamena, the capital of Chad.

Africa is the arena for the largest number of Britain’s

Armed Forces overseas on training or operational missions. According to the Ministry of Defence there many short-term military teams training security forces to respond “appropriately and proportionally” to security threats, terrorism, violations of human rights, wildlife preservation and emerging humanitarian crises.

Britain has for some years had forces in Nigeria, its former colony where Shell Oil Company has major investments, supposedly training its military and security forces to deal with Islamist terrorist groups. It recently emerged—after initial denials—that Britain had in 2019 provided training and equipment for Nigeria’s police and security forces, funded via its so-called “aid” budget. The notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), widely recognized as one of the worst in the world, was the focus of October’s mass anti-police brutality protest movement, which government forces ruthlessly suppressed.

In addition to its forces in Nigeria, Djibouti and Somalia, Britain has 14 training missions on the continent operating out of its base in Kenya, including in Gabon, Malawi, and Zambia. This is in addition to its participation in UN peacekeeping missions, recently doubling its deployments to South Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

News of the anticipated deployment to Mali comes in the wake of the government’s announcement of increased funding for the military that will lift the UK’s defence budget by £21.5 billion by March 2025, to £63 billion. This is the largest real terms increase in 30 years, confirming that the ruling elite are stepping up their military preparations in pursuit of their geo-strategic aims.

The Labour Party not only endorsed Johnson’s “long overdue” expansion of British militarism, but sought to outflank the Tory government on the right. Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey attacked the Tories for their decade in power, during which “the size of the armed forces has been cut by a quarter, defence spending was cut by over £7 billion.”



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