# President Macron rejects troop draw-down in French military intervention in the Sahel

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French President Emmanuel Macron spoke on Sunday via videoconference at a meeting of the Sahel G5, which includes the five countries in the region participating in the French and German-led military intervention: Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.

Macron used the speech to reject rumours of an imminent withdrawal or scaling down of the French military occupation of the Sahel. “Significant changes will no doubt be introduced to our military force in the Sahel at the appropriate time, but they will not happen immediately,” he said. “A French withdrawal, to massively reduce the number of men, which is an option I have studied, would be an error.”

France invaded Mali in 2013 against separatist and Islamist forces that came from Libya after the 2011 NATO regime-change war in that country. There have been more than 4,100 French troops stationed there for almost eight years, increased to 5,100 troops by Macron one year ago.

The French army has waged the war under the cynical banner of the fight against terrorism and the defence of the local population. In reality, it is a brutal neo-colonial war aimed at subjugating the resource-rich and geo-strategically critical region.

The Sahel contains uranium deposits that supply France for its energy production, as well as the major French drone base in Niger. The region is situated in a geographically important area of western Africa, which contains not only the third largest gold deposits in the world, but where European imperialism is seeking to hold back the growing economic and diplomatic influence of China.

The war has been marked by a series of military setbacks for the French occupying forces in recent months, including the deaths of another two French soldiers on January 2 when their car was struck by an improvised explosive device.

Macron did not refer in his speech to the continuing reports of war crimes committed by the armies with which France is jointly operating and who were participating in Monday’s summit. The reports include evidence of acts of collective retribution against entire towns accused of harbouring sympathizers with Islamist groups, and of tacit backing for ethnic sectarian massacres against the predominately Muslim, Peuhl (or Fulani) communities.

On December 21 last year, AFP leaked selected portions of a United Nations report accusing the Malian army of committing war crimes. The report was transmitted by the Security Council but was immediately dropped and has not since been commented upon by the French government.

The document is almost 350 pages long. According to the AFP report, the authors claim to have “reasonable grounds to believe” that the Malian army “has committed war crimes.” It cites one incident in 2017, which occurred during a joint operation involving French and Malian army troops.

“On May 2 around 4pm, many people, principally Peuhl men,” were arrested, and were “violently beaten by Malian soldiers with batons, to force them to admit that they belonged to armed extremist groups, [the troops] threatening to kill them if they did not admit.” It claims that three men were killed on the scene.

However, this is only one of countless reports of war crimes by the occupation.

On November 1, *Libération* published a report based on witness testimony claiming that the Malian army massacred 24 people in a single village eight days earlier, in the town of Lièbè.

“Multiple witnesses accuse the army of responsibility

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in the massacre," it states. "Between 15 and 20 vehicles of the Malian forces arrived in Lièbè in the mornings, [the witnesses] state. Soldiers rapidly opened fire. Six victims were tied up, their eyes blindfolded, before being shot, according to one survivor… The method indicates summary executions…" The witnesses state that the troops then set fire to houses and continued to shoot indiscriminately at the townspeople. Half of the victims were aged over 50, and three were aged over 70.

The attack is reported to have been retribution following a terrorist attack by Islamist forces one week earlier near Sokura, 50 kilometres away from Lièbè, which killed 10 civilians and 11 soldiers.

Last July, Human Rights Watch released its own report, based on interviews with 23 people from Djibo, a town in the north of Niger, 45 kilometres from the border with Mali. More than 180 graves were discovered in Djibo over several months last year, all believed to have been people killed by security forces between 2019 and 2020.

The occupying troops are also widely reported to be collaborating with local militia, in particular groups from the ethnic Dogon community. The local security forces are reported to have armed and backed the Dogon militia and turned a blind eye to sectarian massacres of ethnic Peuhl communities.

A series of increasingly horrific ethnic massacres have taken place in the past two years, including the killing of over 150 people by Dogon militia groups in the town of Ogossagou in 2019. For Paris, these attacks serve not only to intimidate and terrorise the local population, but to provide a human rights justification for the maintenance of a permanent occupation force.

Last August, the Malian government was overthrown in a military coup. The military government was immediately given the support of Paris and announced that it was calling on Malian troops to continue their support in the French-led international occupation of the country.

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