

160 killed in massacre at Solhan in northern Burkina Faso

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In the night on Friday and early Saturday morning, the West African nation of Burkina Faso saw one of the bloodiest massacres of the entire French-led war in the Sahel. A raid killed at least 160 people, including 20 children, and wounded over 40, in the village of Solhan in northern Burkina Faso's Yagha province, bordering Niger. As of this writing, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Hamadi Boubacar, the mayor of the neighboring town of Sebba said, "Many assailants arrived on about 20 motorcycles around 2:00 a.m. They principally attacked the mining site next to the village of Solhan." The attackers were "pitiless and killed all those they found in their path," Boubacar added.

A gold rush in the area, near both Niger and Mali, has turned Solhan into a crossroads where people of many different ethnicities and tribes meet and live together. Boubacar explained: "Solhan is a big village, many people live there because of gold, more than 30,000 people. The people who were attacked came from all over the province. There are even people from Bouri, the regional capital, from Sebba, and from nearby villages. There are people of many ethnicities."

A local source in Solhan told AFP that the assailants attacked homes and carried out "executions" after striking a position of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Motherland (VDP) militia, which backs the Burkinabè national army.

The VDP was created in December 2019 to assist Burkina Faso's army as ethnic militias and other armed groups have spread across the area amid the war in Mali and across the Sahel. VDP volunteers receive only two weeks of military training before deploying to work alongside the security forces, carrying out surveillance, information-gathering or escort duties. The VDP have suffered more than 200 fatalities,

according to an AFP tally.

An anonymous local told the Associated Press that as he visited relatives in a medical clinic in Sebba, near Solhan, he saw many wounded arrive at the clinic. "I saw 12 people in one room and about 10 in another. There were many relatives caring for the wounded. There were also many people running from Solhan to enter Sebba ... People are very afraid and worried," he said.

The Burkinabè government has declared 72 hours of national mourning, from June 5 to 7. President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré condemned the attack as "barbaric" and "despicable," adding: "We must remain united and solid against these obscurantist forces."

The European powers made token statements of sympathy. The European Union (EU) condemned "barbaric and cowardly attacks." French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced on Twitter a trip "this week" to Burkina Faso and that he would express "the solidarity of France during my trip this week to Burkina Faso."

In fact, the escalating bloodshed in this region, which includes many of the poorest countries in the world, is the product of France's eight-year, neo-colonial war in the Sahel. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have all seen a resurgence of violence. As it sought to pursue a policy of divide-and-rule to maintain its control over the area, France and its NATO allies have stoked ethnic conflicts and backed various rival militias, resulting in a resurgence of bloody massacres across the region.

Saturday's attack occurred in the so-called "three borders zone" between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, which has been regularly targeted by Islamist armed groups tied to Al Qaeda, state security forces, and ethnic violence perpetrated by rival militias. In March, assailants killed 137 people in coordinated raids on

villages in the southwestern Tahoua region of Niger after another attack killed at least 58 villagers in the nearby region of Tillabery.

Attacks have been on the rise ever since March 2019, when gunmen killed 160 people in the largely Fulani village of Ogossagou in the Malian region of Bankass, bordering Burkina Faso. There was widespread suspicion that French and Malian officials tacitly backed the massacre: it targeted an ethnic group in which Islamist militias have recruited more forces, and Malian officials apprehended but did not prosecute members of the militia that had carried out the massacre.

The so-called G5 Sahel force set up by France—comprising troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—is participating in military operations alongside French and Malian forces.

Recently, human rights organizations have accused Burkinabè security forces of carrying out atrocities against the population in the name of counter-terrorism. According to a Human Rights Watch report last July, based on local residents' accounts, the security forces unlawfully killed several hundred men on suspicion of supporting armed Islamist groups linked to Al Qaeda.

The atrocities in Solhan came just weeks after Defence Minister Cheriff Sy and other top brass visited Sebba to assure people that life had returned to normal, after several military operations in the area. Significantly, although security forces were deployed near the village, they did not arrive on the scene after the massacre began. This has again raised widespread questions over potential complicity of the security forces with the assailants in the recent massacre.

Al Jazeera reporter Nicolas Haque said, "There was also a military barracks not far away from where the attack took place. But they did not react. They never arrived on the scene. It's a feeling that people across the Sahel now share in—that they cannot rely on their security forces to protect them."

Over 2.2 million people are internally displaced in the Sahel by the fighting, according to UN figures. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P) stated, "almost 7,000 people were killed during 2020, making it the deadliest year in the Central Sahel since the conflict began." At least 2,400 civilians were killed in attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2020. GCR2P noted, "In Burkina Faso and Mali,

more civilians were killed by local militias and national security forces than by attacks by Islamist armed groups."

Alex Vines, director of the Africa Programme at the British think-tank, Chatham House, told Al Jazeera, "I'm afraid we are going to have to expect more similar types of reports." Remaining silent on European imperialist powers' role in the region, he blamed the massacre on African governments: "The governments are increasingly weak and ineffective. And they are not providing the security that populations need. And so armed groups ... are filling those gaps."

Vines blandly predicted that the bloodshed spreading from Mali would engulf virtually all of West Africa. "It's all very serious and it is spreading regionally. This isn't just about the Sahel," he said, adding, "there are overspill security incidents now, in countries along the Gulf of Guinea coast. So, think Benin, think Togo. The Ghanaians are particularly worried about what's happening along their border with Burkina Faso. Ivory Coast, also. This is becoming increasingly an international issue."

These horrific massacres are in fact the toxic product of years of war and neo-colonial intrigue, that can only be stopped by unifying workers across West Africa and Europe in a movement against imperialist oppression and military-police rule.



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