French troops fire on growing protests against French presence in Africa

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Nearly nine years after France invaded Mali and launched military operations throughout the Sahel, popular anger and opposition to the French military presence are erupting across the region. Masses of people hold French forces and the European allies responsible for escalating bloodshed, accusing the French military of secretly arming Islamist militias they are supposedly helping to fight.

Last month, protesters in Burkina Faso and Niger blocked a large French military convoy, escorted by local forces, traveling from Ivory Coast to Niger, as they believed the convoy was carrying weapons to arm terrorist groups. French troops fired on crowds who were blocking their path, killing two people and wounding dozens.

"We asked them to open their vehicles so that we have an idea of the contents," one protester, Bassirou Ouedraogo, told Reuters. "We know what is inside: suspect items."

Another protester said: "We are ready to burn any French material passing by. We do not need France in this country anymore. That's our will."

The military convoy was reportedly stranded in Burkina Faso for more than a week, as protesters prevented it from moving. At the town of Kaya in northern Burkina Faso, protesters reportedly approached the convoy on a strip of wasteland where it had spent the night, carrying handwritten signs that said: "Kaya says to the French army go home."

Several protesters were injured at a protest in Kaya when French and Burkinabè troops tried to force protesters to let the convoy leave, and French troops fired at the crowd. Medical personnel told *African News* that "the emergency department at the Kaya hospital received four people with gunshot wounds."

A protester in Kaya explained that he wanted to know where the Islamist militant groups obtain weapons. He told VOA, "From where do the jihadists get their weapons? It's from the French. That's why we have blocked the convoy in Kaya. They shot at us yesterday and three people were injured. We were there yesterday, and today we are back again to block the convoy."

"Today they shot at us with heavy weapons. They first shot in the air and after they shot and wounded people. Is that normal?" protester Mahamadi Sawadogo told AP. "You're in our country, even though you colonized Africans there are things you must not do."

After the convoy left Burkina Faso, protesters began blocking the convoy once it crossed into western Niger. According to Nigerian authorities, two protesters were killed and 16 injured on November 27. Eyewitness told the French TV station TV5 Monde that they saw French soldiers firing into the crowd.

The French military did not deny firing at the crowd, but implausibly denied that they had hit the protesters. Colonel Pascal Ianni, the spokesman for the French Army Chief of Staff, told VOA: "I repeat what I just said, the French forces did not shoot at the crowd," adding: "French forces fired above the crowd and fired in front of the crowd, at the feet of the crowd, to stop the most violent demonstrators."

The French war in Mali is a neo-colonial war of plunder, and French troops should be withdrawn from Africa immediately. The war in Mali, also involving German and other European Union (EU) troops as well as soldiers from neighboring African states allied to Paris, has nothing to do with opposition to Islamist terrorism. Rather, it was the continuation of the bloody 2011 NATO war in nearby Libya, in which Paris armed Islamist and tribal militias against the Libyan government.

The NATO powers deepened their ties to Al Qaeda-linked militias in their proxy war in Syria, where these ties became public knowledge and the subject of testimony to the US Congress. Successive French governments intensively courted Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms that fund Islamist terror networks but also buy large quantities of French-made weapons and recycle their oil earnings into European financial markets.

The neo-colonial war in Mali was an integral part of this imperialist looting of Africa and the Middle East. Placing French troops near Algeria's massive natural gas reserves and Niger's key uranium mines, the war gave Paris lucrative strategic leverage across the region.

Explosive anti-colonial sentiment and accusations of French complicity with Islamist terror groups, which also carried out terror attacks within France, have shaken the French ruling class. In *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Caroline Roussy of the Institute of Strategic and International Relations (IRIS) think-tank hysterically denounced African workers' and rural toilers' accusations of French economic plunder and complicity with terror groups as a "sick conspiracy theory."

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told French television that "manipulators" are behind opposition to the French military presence, but that he hoped a solution would be found.

The reality is that since the French invasion of Mali in January 2013, violence and the influence of Islamist militias have surged in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and across the region. As it pursued a policy of divide-and-rule to maintain its control over the area, France and its NATO allies stoked ethnic conflicts and backed various rival militias, resulting in a resurgence of bloody massacres across the region. Accusations that certain ethnic groups were more favorable to Islamist militias also ignited inter-communal violence in areas across the region.

In recent months, jihadist violence has been rapidly escalating across the Sahel. According to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, "more than 1,500 civilians have been killed across the Central Sahel during 2021. In the volatile Tillabéri and Tahoua regions of western Niger, more than 600 civilians have been killed this year, over five times more than in 2020."

In August, suspected jihadists slaughtered more than 40 civilians in northern Mali and killed 12 troops in an ambush in neighboring Burkina Faso. In the same month, they killed 80 people including 59 civilians and government forces in northern Burkina Faso. In June, gunmen carried out the bloodiest massacres, killing 160 people in northern Burkina Faso's Yagha province, bordering Niger.

Last month, gunmen killed 69 people and 25 people in two separate attacks in southwest Niger, and 49 military police officers and four civilians in Burkina Faso.

On December 3, at least 30 people were killed and dozens injured in an attack near Bandiagara in central Mali, with the Malian military regime reporting 31 dead and 17 injured. So far, the attack has not been claimed by any of the Islamist armed groups operating in the region.

"The civilians were in a transport vehicle. The passengers were machine-gunned and the vehicle was burnt. The state has sent security forces to the scene," local authorities in the Mopti region told Agence France-Presse. An elected official in the town of Bandiagara confirmed the death toll, adding that among the victims were "children and women and those who disappeared."

Stopping the bloodshed depends on bringing French troops home, expelling imperialist influence from Africa, and uniting workers across national boundaries in Africa, Europe, and internationally in a movement against war and neo-colonial plunder.

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