

French troops ordered out of Niger

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The military junta headed by General Abdourahmane Tchiani announced last Monday that all French troops in Niger, a former French colony, must leave the country by early September.

This announcement comes after Colonel Major Amadou Abdramane, spokesman for the CNSP (The National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland), announced August 3 the official cancellation of five military cooperation agreements signed with France between 1977 and 2020.

France has already been forced to withdraw 2,400 soldiers from Mali and 400 from Burkina Faso following military coups in May 2021 and September 2022, drastically reducing its military presence in its former colonial territories. Chad now hosts the imperialist country's last military base in the Sahel region of Africa, a belt of land below the Sahara Desert stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.

The scale of the crisis for French imperialism was highlighted by a public argument between French President Emanuel Macron and Bernard Emie, the head of the DGSE intelligence service. Multiple sources reported the president telling Emie, "We can see that the DGSE's way of functioning is not satisfactory. When you don't see anything coming, there's a problem." Emie responded that he had warned Macron, with material leaked to the press to confirm this.

French forces have been carrying out military operations in the region under the banner of the "war on terror" for years, fighting jihadist militias with origins in the imperialist proxy war waged against Libya in 2011. Roughly 1,500 soldiers are based in Niger, whose capital Niamey hosts a French air base at Diori-Hamani International Airport. Several Mirage 2000D fighter jets, attack helicopters, MQ-9 Reaper drones, military vehicles and equipment are stationed at the base.

The role of the French military across the Sahel, plus economic exploitation, have fueled widespread popular hostility, which the coup leaders in Mali, Burkina and now Niger have sought to mobilise in their support. On

July 30, protests were held outside the French embassy, during which a door was set on fire. On August 11, thousands of people protested outside the French air base.

The French government has been bellicose. Macron's office responded to the embassy protest with the statement, "Should anyone attack French nationals, the army, diplomats, and French interests, they will see France respond in an immediate and intractable manner, French president Emmanuel Macron will not tolerate it."

On August 9, Abdramane accused France of destabilizing the country by violating Niger's closed airspace and releasing 16 terrorists in the Tillaberi region, who he said were being mobilized to plan attacks on Nigerien military positions in the border areas.

He added that a unit of the National Guard was attacked by jihadis at Bourkou Bourkou, about 30 kilometers from the Samira gold mine operated by a Canadian and Moroccan company in the Tillaberi region.

A series of bloody attacks have been launched on the military since the coup. On Tuesday, 17 soldiers were killed and 20 wounded in an attack by an armed group near the border with Mali in Koutougou.

Although the French government immediately denied the allegations, it and the other Western imperialist powers are notorious for using Islamist proxies for their own ends, as in the devastating wars in Libya and Syria.

France has also refused to accept the demand for the withdrawal of its troops, responding that "the legal framework for its cooperation with Niger in the area of defense is based on agreements that have been concluded with the legitimate Niger authorities... These are the only ones that France, and the entire international community, recognizes."

The French government is inclined to be more reckless because it feels that its nominal imperialist allies have abandoned it, while rushing to secure their own positions.

Le Figaro reported Sunday, "After the putsch in Niger, France fears being overtaken by its American ally". Based on comments from a French diplomat, the paper reported the US "did the exact opposite of what we thought they

would do,” by sending Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to meet with the coup leaders. The article begins with the line, “With allies like that, we don’t need enemies.”

The paper summarized its source’s view that the “Americans simply want to keep their bases in the region above all else. Washington will not hesitate to drop a demand for what he called constitutional legality to achieve this goal...

“The United States, like all our allies for that matter, has a habit of letting us take the hits.”

This assessment found support in a CNN article Thursday which reported, “The Biden administration is searching for ways to keep US forces and assets in Niger to continue anti-terror operations, even as it becomes increasingly unlikely that the military junta that overthrew the country’s government last month will cede power back to the democratically elected president.”

CNN added that Brigadier General Moussa Barmou, currently occupying the role of chief of defence and trained by the US military, was “a key variable”. It quotes the United States’s former commander of Special Operations Command Africa Major General J. Marcus Hicks’s opinion that Barmou was “not anti-western” and a friend to a lot of us in the US military... I have no sense that they want us to leave.” Nuland met Barmou during her visit.

So far, the military in Niger have made no request to US forces to leave the country, nor Italian and German.

The coup leaders are tapping into a well of anti-French sentiment. But the ongoing negotiations with US forces behind the scenes expose any anti-imperialist pretensions on the part of the government.

While the US has chosen its words more carefully than France, it has still declared its support for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is making preparations for what would be a catastrophic military intervention in Niger as a “last resort”. ECOWAS leaders are meeting Thursday-Friday in Accra, the capital of Ghana, to discuss plans.

The Russian government is also pitching itself as an anti-imperialist force in the region, as it has done throughout Africa to help curry favour with its governments.

Putin told participants in the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security on August 15, “There is no doubt that those behind these conflicts are seeking to benefit from human tragedy by pitching nations against one another, subjugating states into feudal obedience within a neo-colonial system and exploiting their

resources without mercy.”

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu accused the West of “maintaining centers of conflict” on the African continent to profit from the natural resources of its former colonies. He added that the Russian Defense Ministry will “continue to strengthen its military and technical cooperation with African countries in the fight against neo-colonialism and the threat of terrorism.”

But Russia has nothing to offer on either front. Mali and Burkina Faso, where Russia’s Wagner mercenary group is operating, are still ravaged by armed militias, still at the mercy of international finance capital, and now threatened by an imperialist-sponsored war centered on Niger which would plunge their societies into chaos.

For the expulsion of French troops to be more than window dressing on a regime maneuvering between the imperialist powers and their major rivals Russia and China, a struggle must be taken up against them all by the working class and rural poor. Workers in West Africa confront not only French but many of the world’s major imperialist powers, whose geopolitical conflicts are dragging the region into the maelstrom of a global conflict. This is a struggle they share with the entire working class, across Africa and in the imperialist centres.



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