

US resumes drone flights amid mass protests in Niger

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15 September 2023

Less than two months after coming to power in a coup that toppled a French-backed president, Niger's military junta has authorized US troops stationed in their country to resume patrols by drones and fighter-bombers. At the same time, Washington, which has 1,100 of the 6,500 troops it stations in Africa in Niger, is moving troops 920 kilometers north from the capital, Niamey, to Agadez.

The Pentagon said last week that U.S. forces had moved from Air Base 101 near Niamey to Air Force Base 201 in Agadez, amid ongoing mass protests in Niamey demanding that French forces leave the country. But now, Washington has reached "an agreement with Niger's military leaders to restart drone, crewed aircraft missions at two airbases," Al Jazeera reported.

Gen. James Hecker, the top Air Force commander for Europe and Africa, boasted that US intelligence and surveillance missions had been able to resume thanks to US negotiations with the Nigerien junta.

Hecker said. "For a while we weren't doing any missions on the bases. They pretty much closed down the airfields, Through the diplomatic process, we are now doing—I wouldn't say 100 percent of the missions that we were doing before—but we're doing a large amount of missions that we're doing before."

In early 2013, US forces were massively deployed to Niger under the pretext of supporting the French military intervention in Mali. Later, it built a military air base with a 6,800-foot runway at Agadez, in northern Niger.

Construction on the site began in 2016 at a cost of US\$250 million. Currently, the base is the main US observation center in West Africa, with a yearly budget of \$20 to \$30 million spent to maintain it.

"The Command also operates out of 12 other posture

locations throughout Africa," said AFRICOM chief Gen. Michael Langley. Langley also claimed, "These locations have minimal permanent US presence and have low-cost facilities and limited supplies for these dedicated Americans to perform critical missions and quickly respond to emergencies."

US imperialism operates drones, fighter jets and also giant military transport aircraft like the C-17 Globemaster from this base. Washington now reports that it has resumed drone strikes from this base against al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates Boko Haram and other "Islamist groups" that the NATO powers initially used as proxy forces in their war that devastated Libya in 2011.

By placing its forces in Agadez, Washington aims to maintain control over a critical, resource-rich area, even as mass protests in Niamey demand the removal of NATO imperialist powers' troops from the country. Northern Niger contains a number of uranium and gold mines that play a critical role in the region's economy and in the global energy trade.

Agadez also hosts a large UN refugee camp that the NATO powers are using to detain African refugees seeking to flee north to Europe via the Sahara desert, North Africa and the Mediterranean. The US and French military presence in the area helps to block the refugees' flight northwards, and to anchor a network stretching across Africa of NATO detention camps that block refugees from arriving in Europe.

So far, the Nigerien junta has responded to mass protests against the French and NATO troop presence by making limited diplomatic overtures to Moscow. Amid the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, there is broad opposition among African workers and youth to the NATO imperialist powers. On this basis, the junta in Niger and similar regimes in nearby Mali and

Burkina Faso have attempted to posture as anti-imperialist by criticizing France and developing limited military ties with Moscow.

The backdoor maneuvering of the Nigerien junta with Washington exposes this posture as a cynical fraud. While developing ties to the post-Soviet capitalist regime in Moscow created by the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, the junta is in fact seeking to maintain and develop its ties with imperialism. It hides its orientation to NATO and global financial markets, however, behind limited criticisms of France and false expressions of sympathy with Russia.

It is seeking to maximize the political advantages ruling circles in Niger and in the Nigerien military brass can obtain from playing off the major powers against each other. Relations between France and the United States have indubitably been strained by the coup in Niger.

A Nigerien military spokesman issued a statement last Saturday condemning the government of Emmanuel Macron, noting that France is preparing ECOWAS countries for war against Niger, to oust the military rulers in Niamey from power. Macron responded by insisting that Paris does not recognize the Nigerien regime in any way. “We do not recognize any legitimacy in the statements of the junta in Niger,” Macron said during a press conference.

Yesterday, Macron again told journalists that French Ambassador to Niger Sylvain Itté, whom the junta has demanded leave Niger, has been taken hostage. Itté is now holed up in the French embassy, refusing to leave. Macron however endorsed Itté and the deposed former French-backed Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum as legitimate authorities in Niger.

Nigerien military forces, Macron said, “are preventing food from being delivered [to Bazoum]. He eats on military rations ... I will do what we agree with President Bazoum, because he is the legitimate authority, and I speak to him every day.”

Washington has taken a different position on the junta in Niamey, however.

Acting Deputy U.S. Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, who played a critical role in organizing the 2014 US-backed coup in Ukraine, made an official visit on August 7 to hold talks with Niger coup leaders. After the talks, Nuland said, “I hope they will keep the door open to diplomacy. We made that proposal. We’ll

see. But we gave them a number of options to keep talking and we hope they take us up on it.”

It appears that Nuland’s hopes and expectations were realized through the talks US officials held with the junta in Niamey, which is keeping US forces in a key location to control Niger’s critical natural resources.

Tensions are rising therefore not only between Russia and the NATO powers in Africa, but also among the NATO imperialist powers, as forces in Paris fear that Washington will make its gains at the expense of French imperialism in Niger.

“France fears being overtaken by its American ally after the Niger coup,” wrote the right-wing French daily *Le Figaro* in a recent article. It quoted a French foreign ministry official as saying of the United States: “As long as we have allies like these, we don’t need enemies.”

The escalating war between the NATO powers and Russia in Europe, and the closely linked great-power rivalries in Africa, poses enormous dangers to the working class. The danger of a broader military escalation across much of Europe and Africa that will involve fighting directly among the major nuclear powers is now posed.

The way forward is indicated by the growing mobilization of the African workers and youth against French and NATO imperialism. A broader war can only be stopped if the workers and youth in Niger, across the Sahel and internationally build a united, international anti-war and anti-imperialist movement based on a socialist, internationalist perspective.



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