

170 killed in Burkina Faso massacre as French-Russian rivalry grows in Sahel

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8 March 2024

In a series of massacres over the past two weeks, more than 170 people were killed in Burkina Faso, a former French colony plunged into bloodshed by France's 2013-2022 war in neighboring Mali.

On February 25, 170 people were killed in the towns of Komsilka, Nodin and Soro in Yatenga, in northern Burkina Faso. On March 4, RFI (Radio France Internationale) reported, new massacres occurred in the villages of Bigbou and Soualimou in eastern Burkina Faso's Komondjari province, near the border with Niger.

RFI stated, "Several videos collected by our editorial staff show dozens of corpses: men, women, children, lying on the ground. In these same images, we see a few men in armed civilian clothes, on motorcycles, who collect and give water to children, obviously survivors of the massacre."

A mosque in Natiaboani was also attacked. "Armed individuals attacked a mosque in Natiaboani on Sunday around 5:00 a.m. (local time and GMT), leaving several dozen dead. The victims are all Muslims, mainly men who had gathered at the mosque," a witness told AFP (Agence France-Presse). A series of other attacks also on February 25 targeted the military detachment of Tankoulou (east), Kongoussi and the Ouahigouya area in the north.

The horrific February 25 massacre was reported internationally after Ouahigouya regional prosecutor Aly Benjamin Coulibaly released his findings last Sunday. Survivors said dozens of women and young children were among the victims as well.

On the same day, an attack on a church in the village of Essakane in northern Burkina Faso left 12 dead and three wounded. Attackers killed at least 15 worshipers and wounded two others, Abbot Jean-Pierre Sawatago said in a statement. Sawatago blamed the massacres on "jihadist" groups.

Burkina Faso's military junta blamed the attack on

Ansaroul Islam, a local armed group linked to Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State of the Sahel (EIS).

Residents who took refuge in Fada N'gourma, the capital of neighboring Gourma province, told the press that the new Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) was involved in the massacres in Komondjari province. The BIR, created last October by junta leader Captain Ibrahim Traoré, is stationed in the area of Gayeri in which the massacres took place, the Burkina Faso Information agency reported two weeks ago.

Since the French intervention in Mali began in 2013, fighting has mounted across the entire Sahel region. In Burkina Faso, nearly 20,000 people have been killed and more than 2 million internally displaced since clashes between jihadist groups and government forces began in 2015. According to Acled, a US-based non-governmental organization that tracks deaths in armed conflicts worldwide, 439 people were killed in the violence in Burkina Faso this January alone.

Many provinces of Burkina Faso have established a state of emergency, and large portions of the country are not under government control. A November 2 Amnesty International report, titled "Death Awaits Us," found that 46 localities with a total population of over 1 million—of the country's 22 million—are besieged by jihadist groups. UN figures at the end of 2022 showed that over 2.6 million civilians faced severe food insecurity in Burkina Faso. One in five Burkinabès, or 4.7 million people, needed humanitarian assistance.

The French war in Mali not only led to massively bloody massacres by French forces, like the infamous 2021 bombing of a wedding in the Malian town of Bounty that killed 22 people. It also led to bloody fighting between militias and state authorities elsewhere in Africa.

In August 2023, the Washington D.C.-based Africa Center for Strategic Studies reported: "Africa has experienced a near three-fold increase in reported violent

events linked to militant Islamist groups over the past decade (from 1,812 events in 2014 to 6,756 events in 2023). Almost half of that growth happened in the last 3 years.”

Broad layers of working people as well as top state officials in the Sahel accuse Paris of using jihadist forces to foment civil war and prepare new invasions in the region. It is a matter of public record that Paris and its NATO imperialist allies supported Al Qaeda-linked militias funded by the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms in the wars for regime change that they launched in 2011 against Libya and Syria.

Two years later, France intervened in Mali on the pretext that they had to save Mali from Islamist forces like Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and Boko Haram. France, America, Germany and other major NATO powers on this basis continued to plunder Africa’s rich resources. Between 2013 and 2022, thousands of French troops deployed to Mali and nearby Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad on military operations Serval (2013-2014) and Barkhane (2014-2022).

As popular anger mounted at Operation Barkhane, coups toppled governments that supported the French military presence, in Mali in 2021, then last year in Burkina Faso and Niger. In October 2021, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga accused the French government of secretly arming Islamist terrorists to maintain conflict in Mali and justify French military occupation. Nigerien officials leveled similar charges at Paris last year.

In Burkina Faso, which has seen eight coups since formal independence from France in 1960, a junta of officers led by Ibrahim Traoré seized power in September 2022. Anti-French sentiment was fueled by rumors on social media that Sandaogo Damiba, who received military training in France and backed Operation Barkhane, was hiding at a French base in Kampoincin near the capital Ouagadougou. French troops withdrew from Burkina Faso in February 2023 amid growing protests by workers and youth against war and social hardship.

These wars in Africa became inextricably linked to global war waged by NATO on Russia in Ukraine as the newly formed juntas in the Sahel, breaking with Paris, sought military aid from Moscow. The Russian state-linked Wagner Group militia has deployed forces to Mali and held talks with Nigerien and Burkinabè officials.

In the last two years, as Paris took an ever more aggressive stance against Russia in the Ukraine conflict, it

also moved aggressively to recoup its lost military positions in the Sahel. It pressed the major regional powers in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to impose sanctions on and prepare to invade Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. There is little doubt that top French officials are well aware of, and seek to exploit, Islamist militia operations in the region.

The growing movement of the African workers, youth and rural masses places direct struggle against French and world imperialism in Africa on the order of the day. Nevertheless, bitter historical experience shows African workers cannot rely on military alliances with Moscow in such a struggle. Not only does Russia’s corrupt post-Soviet capitalist oligarchy seek to cut a deal with the imperialist powers it calls its “Western partners,” but a struggle against imperialism faces deep-rooted opposition in the African ruling classes.

This is the critical lesson from the 1987 French-backed assassination of Burkinabè President Thomas Sankara by Blaise Compaoré. Hostile to Sankara’s political overtures to the Soviet bureaucracy, Compaoré saw in Sankara’s removal a way to develop a base of support in ruling circles and especially in Paris for a military regime he would lead. Compaoré was only toppled 27 years later, in 2014, by mass protests of youth and workers.

These experiences vindicated Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. The capitalist class of underdeveloped countries is incapable of resolving basic democratic tasks or leading a struggle against imperialism. The struggle against imperialism requires the mobilization of the working class and the oppressed across Africa and internationally, on a revolutionary and socialist program aimed at overthrowing the economic power of the capitalist ruling elite.

The way forward for workers in Africa, as in the NATO imperialist countries and the countries of the former Soviet Union, is building an international movement in the working class against imperialist war and for socialism.



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