

# Western powers preparing intervention in Mali

By Ernst Wolff  
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According to eyewitness reports, Islamists recently tore down at least four mausoleums in the Malian world heritage city of Timbuktu. Members of the rebel group Ansar Dine are also alleged to have desecrated the graves of the saints Sidi Mahmud, Sidi Moctar and Alpha Moya and destroyed the mausoleum of Sheikh al-Kebir, which is situated close to the famous mosque of Djingareyber, south of Timbuktu.

The chief prosecutor of the International Court of Justice in the Hague, Fatou Bensouda, called for an immediate halt to all violence and condemned the destruction that had taken place as a “war crime”. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) called on the UN Security Council to approve the dispatch of a rapid deployment force of 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers in the region. Former colonial power France also demanded immediate intervention by the UN.

These developments in Mali, whose population of 15 million numbers amongst the poorest in the world, are a result of the political turmoil that emerged after a military coup in March 2012. The coup ended the rule of President Amadou Toumani Touré, who was replaced by Army Captain Amadou Sanogo.

The coup followed the country’s destabilization by thousands of Tuareg fighters who had supported Muammar Gaddafi against foreign intervention troops in the Libyan war. After Gaddafi’s defeat, they returned home heavily armed and, in many cases, traumatized. Facing catastrophic living conditions, they joined forces with the radical Islamists of Ansar Dine and conquered several cities in the north of Mali, among them Timbuktu, and in April proclaimed the Islamic Republic of Azawad.

The Army attributed its coup against Touré to a lack of support for their struggle against the Tuareg tribes.

The insurgent troops imposed a nationwide curfew, temporarily suspended the constitution, and indefinitely postponed the presidential election that had been scheduled for March 2012.

In late March, the ECOWAS countries posed an ultimatum to the new rulers demanding the reestablishment of constitutional order and the re-imposition of the old government. They threatened to close their borders with Mali, stop trade and block Mali’s accounts with the West African Central Bank.

The coup’s leader, Amadou Sanogo, reacted by reestablishing the constitution, promising democratic elections and handing over civil power to former parliamentary president Dioncounda Traoré. After fierce fighting in which Traoré was injured, Sanogo was once again able to gain the upper hand and took over as transitional president.

Mali’s significance for the imperialist powers has less to do with its economy than with its geostrategic position. It borders on the economically important countries of Northern Africa and on Western African countries with vast resources. It is regarded as a hub for exercising economic and political influence in the region.

Former president Touré, who came to power in a coup in 1991, enjoyed US military and economic support for many years. According to figures released by the US government, Washington backed Mali with \$138 million in 2011 and planned to increase its support to \$170 million in 2012. A joint military manoeuvre between US forces and the Mali army took place in January.

The new ruler is by no means unknown to the US government. Sanogo took part in language training courses in Texas from August 2004 until February 2005. In 2007, he was schooled by the US Secret

Service and trained as an infantry officer in Georgia for five months.

It is quite possible that Sanogo's coup was arranged in cooperation with the US government. However, imperialist forces will not be happy with the result because Mali's north is still in the hands of the insurgents. A future UN intervention supported by the US cannot be excluded, because for Washington, Mali is particularly important from the standpoint of containing Chinese influence in Africa.

Just as the international intervention in Libya was aimed in part at denying China access to North African oil, a military intervention in Mali in cooperation with the US would target Chinese influence in the country.

This influence has grown in recent years. Chinese direct investments in Mali increased 300-fold from 1995 to 2008. Mali ranks with Zambia, South Africa and Egypt among African countries where China has made its largest investments.

In addition to the United States, France also has an intense interest in its former colony, and is just waiting to "rescue" the country's cultural heritage with a military intervention backed by the UN Security Council. France wants to preempt a new competitor in the battle for spheres of influence—Germany, whose imperialist appetite is steadily increasing. In Germany, a "Sahel Task Force" was launched in February with the remit to attend to "political, security and economic issues in the Sahel region," which includes parts of Mali.

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