

France, US step up pressure for military intervention in Mali

By Kumaran Ira
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France and the United States are urging UN Security Council to approve a West African-manned military intervention in Northern Mali, to wage a “war on terror” against Islamist forces that have occupied the region since March.

At the UN General Assembly meeting last Wednesday, French President François Hollande called for approving the military intervention as quickly as possible. He said, “Mali needs help to seize back territory from Islamist rebels, who captured the north and east of the country after a coup created a power vacuum in March. We have to act, act together and act quickly, because it is urgently needed.”

Hollande urged other nations to sanction a UN Security Council resolution “to help Mali win back its territorial integrity,” adding that the situation in the north of the country “is unbearable and unacceptable.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has echoed Hollande’s call: “Mali’s security forces need help, and African-led interventions in Somalia and the Ivory Coast were successful ... We all know too well what is happening in Mali, and the incredible danger posed by violent extremists imposing their brutal ideology, committing human rights abuses, destroying irreplaceable cultural heritage.”

After launching a war against Libya under the guise of protecting “human rights” last year, France intervened in the civil war in Ivory Coast with US and UN backing, to topple incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and install Western-backed Alassane Ouattara in power.

Last year’s NATO war in Libya has set the stage for the Western powers to increase their military influence in Africa, seeking to control vast resources such as oil and gas, and undercut the growing influence of rival powers, particularly China. France is seeking to exploit

its military resources in West and Northwest Africa, where many countries are former French colonies.

Before the UN meeting, Mali’s interim government and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) reached an agreement on the deployment of 3,000 troops with aerial support in the North. They are awaiting UN approval before sending troops.

Mali has undergone a civil war since early this year after Tuareg forces who reportedly fought for Gadhafi in Libya, returned to Mali and took control of northern Mali, a home to most of Mali’s Tuareg. These forces are organized in the National Movement for Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA). They joined with Islamist groups in taking control of the region.

The rebels’ victory in the North led to a military coup in Bamako, ousting longtime President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT). Subsequently, Northern Mali largely passed under the control of Islamist groups, particularly Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), which are both linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

In backing a troop deployment by ECOWAS, the imperialist powers are trying to get regional countries with pro-Western governments to provide cannon fodder for an intervention they will control politically and logistically. Western-aligned governments in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad are reportedly planning to send troops, and Senegal is considering whether to contribute forces.

France and the US have deployed Special Forces, who are training the African military forces, in the Sahel. According to reports in the French press, Washington has 400 Special Forces troops and France 200, while Algeria and Mauritania are contributing 300 and 100 apiece. France will soon send more Navy commandos and is also contributing patrol flights,

intelligence, and surveillance systems based in Niger.

Philippe Hugon, an Africa specialist at France's Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS), said: "France has always maintained a presence in the country via its secret services. Today, it's using its know-how to train and support ECOWAS forces that are not powerful enough to lead this kind of operation on their own."

The Algerian daily *El-Khabar* has reported that French Special Forces are training African troops in Libya. It cited Liess Boukra, the former director of Algiers' Center for the Study of Terrorism (CAERT): "This news does not surprise me. The French have regional interests, in Libya as in Niger. But an intervention demands prudence and finesse, due to the overlapping of unstable alliances and of spheres of influence of foreign powers that have their own agenda."

The US has also expanded its military's Special Forces Operation Command and CIA strike capabilities in Africa. *Le Nouvel Observateur* writes, "The CIA has installed its headquarters for the Maghreb-Sahel region in Algeria. As for its Special Forces, they are based in Mali and Burkina Faso."

Reports of the installation of a CIA base in Algeria highlight that country's role in the escalating imperialist intervention in Africa. The FLN government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria, which borders northern Mali, is seeking to downplay its role in the military intervention in Mali. It is posturing as an opponent of foreign intervention, issuing cynical appeals to national unity.

In May Bouteflika declared, "Our youth will know how to rise up against the enemies of the country and to confront the instigators of *fitna* and division and of any trace of foreign intervention."

Abdelaziz Rabahi, a former minister, warned: "It is Algeria that will bear the brunt of instability in the region, and that will pay the price of an intervention—a lasting ECOWAS presence in the region, a flood of refugees, and the displacement of Islamist groups towards the north."

While making public statements ostensibly hostile to outside intervention, the FLN government is tacitly supporting it, on the 50th anniversary of its independence from France. Noting Algeria's "long

border with its southern neighbor" *MiddleMali, Online* commented: "The unrest, which led to the murder of an Algerian diplomat this month by an offshoot of AQIM, may be pushing the government to revise its post-colonial foreign policy."

Since the crisis broke out in Mali, Algeria has played a covert role in waging war. It has massed more than 25,000 troops along the Malian and Libyan borders.

At the beginning of this year, Algerian troops crossed into Mali, ostensibly to help Malian government forces combat Islamist groups. AFP cited a high-ranking Algerian military official saying: "Algerian troops are currently stationed in northern Mali to assist the Malian army in the fight against terrorism."

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