

US deploys troops, drones to Niger

By Barry Grey
23 February 2013

President Barack Obama on Friday officially notified the US Congress that he had deployed “approximately” 100 US troops to the western African nation of Niger.

In a perfunctory, six-sentence letter to House Speaker John Boehner and Senator Patrick Leahy, president pro-tem of the Senate, Obama said the final 40 troops had arrived on Wednesday to “provide support for intelligence collection” and “facilitate intelligence sharing with French forces conducting operations in Mali, and with other partners in the region.”

The only other justification for dispatching the military force, beyond the vague talk of intelligence gathering, was “furtherance of US national security interests.” In the letter, Obama said he was notifying Congress pursuant to his powers as commander in chief and chief executive, and in accordance with the requirements of the 1973 War Powers Resolution, a law intended to bar the president from committing military forces without the consent of Congress.

The War Powers Resolution states that the president can send troops into action abroad only with the authorization of Congress or in case of “a national emergency created by attack upon the United States, its territories or possessions, or its armed forces.” It requires the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of committing forces and forbids them from remaining for more than 60 days without congressional sanction.

The reality behind Obama’s cynical and deceitful letter is the initiation of an open-ended and far-reaching US military intervention in northern Africa. The action announced Friday by Obama marks a major escalation of the drive by the United States and the other imperialist powers to recolonize the continent and gain direct control of its rich storehouse of strategic natural resources.

The use of drones underscores the criminal character of the operation in Niger. They will be used to terrorize

the African population and summarily murder all those identified by the Pentagon and the CIA as opponents of Washington’s drive to conquer and subjugate the continent.

This predatory drive is concealed behind the all-purpose pretext, as part of the “war on terror,” of combating Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias operating in Mali and other parts of the Sahara region.

The past two years have already seen the US-led war for regime-change in Libya, the US- and NATO-backed sectarian civil war in Syria, and last month’s US-backed French invasion of Niger’s neighbor to the west, Mali. The establishment of a US military base of operations in Niger now lays bare the real significance of the 2011 war against Libya, carried out under the pretense of protecting civilians and defending human rights, and the calculated decision to murder Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. All of the operations that have followed the Libyan atrocity were already in the works, as are the even more bloody predations to come.

The real aim behind the introduction of US troops into Niger is to assert American domination of northwest Africa, check French imperialist ambitions in the region, and counter the growing influence of China.

Obama’s claim in his letter to Congress that the Niger government had consented to the US deployment means little, since all of the bourgeois regimes in the region function as stooges of US imperialism and the former colonial powers of Europe.

While Obama did not refer to drones in his letter, unnamed Pentagon officials told media outlets on Friday that drone aircraft had already been sent to the impoverished country, with the “first wave” including two Raptor surveillance drones. They said 250 to 300 military personnel, including remote pilots and security and maintenance crews, would eventually be deployed.

ABC News cited US officials as saying Washington

had already begun flying Predator drones over Mali as part of US military support for the French invasion, which also includes airlifting French and allied African troops and refueling French military aircraft that have bombed cities and towns controlled by Islamist insurgents and Tuareg separatists.

In addition, as part of the Mali operation, US Special Forces have been sent to Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Togo and Ghana.

The current deployment in Niger will reportedly be based in Niamey, the capital, but may be moved to the northern town of Agadez.

While Obama sought in his letter to Congress to give the impression that the deployment will be limited in time and scope and will involve only surveillance drones, what has been set in motion is an expanding operation that will inevitably involve the use of armed drones to extend the administration's assassination program from Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia into northern Africa.

ABC News reported that US Africa Command had "developed a plan a few weeks ago that proposed setting up a base in Niger to enable long-term surveillance operations in western Africa." It cited a government official as saying it was "possible that the new operations could morph into the separate concept proposed by African Command."

The *Washington Post* quoted a US defense official, who said, "I think it's safe to say the number [of US troops] will probably grow." It cited other officials who said the administration "had not ruled out arming the Predators with missiles in the future."

For weeks, the US press has carried reports of plans by the Obama administration to extend its drone assassination program into northern Africa. At the end of January it was reported that the US had secured an agreement with the government of Niger to establish a US military base in the country. The *Guardian* reported Friday that there are "no constraints to military-to-military cooperation" within that agreement.

Earlier in January, following a hostage siege carried out by Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb at a gas facility in Algeria, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta implicitly threatened to use drone strikes against alleged terrorists in northern Africa. "We have a responsibility to go after Al Qaeda wherever they are,"

Panetta stated, adding that the US was "going after" it in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—all the scenes of continuous drone missile strikes—and would act to deny Al Qaeda a "a base for operations in North Africa and Mali."

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote of an "open-ended" campaign against militants in north and west Africa, and a US State Department official warned that the offensive in Mali "could take years" and was only "the first phase."

The *Journal* published a front-page article two weeks ago headlined "Push to Extend US 'Kill List.'" The article reported discussions within the Obama administration over extending its drone assassination program to Algeria and other countries in the Sahara and northwest Africa.

The US military intervention in Niger contains the seeds of a far wider conflict. The nomadic Tuareg population, which has been waging intermittent struggles against the central government in Mali for decades, exists as well to the east in Niger. The introduction of US troops and drones has the potential of spreading the Tuareg revolt and sparking an ethnic-based transnational civil war.

And as diplomatic cables from US diplomats in Niamey disclosed by WikiLeaks have made clear, China's economic activities in the region have been a focus of US concern. One such cable warned, "China is building a major portfolio in Niger's resource sectors and will probably replace France as Niger's top foreign investor..."

The US move into Niger will further inflame relations between the US and the world's second largest economic power, already frayed as a result of US provocations carried out as part of Obama's "pivot to Asia."

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