

France launches military, propaganda offensive in Mali

By Ernst Wolff
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French soldiers have launched a new offensive in northern Mali. The operation, codenamed “Gustav,” involves one thousand soldiers employing dozens of tanks, artillery, and bombers, as well as drones, for the first time. The offensive is part of the systematic expansion of the war by France and its allies.

Last week the European Union (EU) also began its “European Union Training Mission” (EUTM). Some 550 soldiers from 22 EU countries are tasked with training half of the Malian army over the next 15 months. A first contingent of 570 soldiers from the Malian capital, Bamako, has arrived to begin basic then specialized training, including in telecommunications or as snipers.

The official aim of the 12.3 million euro (\$16.1 million) mission is to “rebuild” the Malian Army, so French forces can gradually withdraw. On March 28, French President François Hollande announced in a television interview that his country would begin the withdrawal of its 4,000 troops in late April and halve their number to coincide with a UN “peace mission” due to take place in July. At year-end, 1,000 French soldiers would remain in Mali.

Hollande failed, however, to refer to the fact that two days earlier, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon had announced in a report to the UN Security Council that the UN “peacekeeping” force of 11,200 men would be significantly larger than previously stated. Ban also raised for the first time the prospect of a second “parallel” task force, focused combat operations and anti-terrorist operations “outside the UN mandate”. This special unit is to be set up primarily by France and will be stationed either within Mali’s borders or elsewhere in West Africa.

Hollande’s pronouncement aims to deceive the public. Instead of a wind-down of military operations,

many more soldiers are to be sent to Mali in the coming period. They will be stationed for a longer period than officially stated, and their field of operation has been significantly expanded beyond Mali’s borders.

This is not the first time the France’s social-democratic president has sought to mislead international public opinion. His initial claim that France was forced to intervene to quell an uprising of Islamist fighters in the capital, Bamako, was just as false.

In an interview with the Swiss *Tagesanzeiger* Georg Klute, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Bayreuth in Africa, revealed that the Malian government has been holding talks with the Islamist Group Ansar Al-Dine for the past three years.

In these talks, Ansar al Dine had offered to declare a ceasefire and abandon its campaign to violently enforce Islamic sharia law. France responded last summer by issuing repeated threats to intervene.

It was in this context of French provocations that the Islamist forces launched an offensive to take the Sevre airport—aimed at preventing the landing of French troops—which served as the pretext for Paris to launch its war in Mali.

The activities of international intelligence agencies confirm that the war in Mali was not the result of short-term decision making.

According to Germany’s *Der Spiegel* magazine, French elite troops were active in Mali months before the official intervention. In September 2012, approximately 100 members of the “Commandement des opérations spéciales” (COS) secretly flew into the country, taking up positions at strategic locations outside the capital, Bamako. Their mission was supplemented by naval reconnaissance and electronic eavesdropping from neighbouring Niger.

According to French news magazine *Marianne*, the COS squad received support from troops previously involved in the French intervention in neighbouring Ivory Coast.

The mission there, called *Opération Sabre*, was carried out with the express permission of the governments of neighbouring countries. The command centre for this operation was in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, where the US army has its headquarters.

Since 2007, the US has established more than a dozen air bases in Africa. The *Washington Post* recently reported on a military mission named “Creek Sand”, carried out by the US military and local contractors in 2012. The mission involved air surveillance of Mali and other West African countries, and military exercises involving American and US-trained Malian soldiers.

All of this information makes clear that, contrary to the claims of the French president that his country planned a lightning response to a terrorist threat, the intervention in Mali was planned and carefully prepared long beforehand.

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