

Twin bomb attacks in Niger signal wider conflict in West Africa

By Niles Williamson
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Two car bombs exploded simultaneously in Niger on Thursday May 23, killing at least 26 people and injuring more than two dozen others. Islamist forces—including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and the Signed-in-Blood Battalion—claimed joint responsibility for the simultaneous attacks.

The attacks signal the expansion of conflicts in the African Sahel that began with the NATO war in 2011 which destroyed the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and continued with France's war in Mali that began this January.

One car bomb exploded inside a military camp in the city of Agadez. The attackers drove through the military garrison's defenses and detonated their explosives, killing 20 soldiers and injuring 16 others. Four militants were killed in the initial attack. Two attackers survived the initial attack and were able to take several hostages, threatening to kill themselves along with their hostages.

On Friday French Special Forces coordinating with Nigerien troops killed the two militants, freeing the hostages.

The second bomb exploded at a French-operated uranium mine near the city of Arlit. Two attackers in an SUV slipped past the gates of the Somair mine, owned by French nuclear energy corporation Areva, and were able to detonate explosive belts, killing themselves, one mine employee, and injuring 13 others.

Production has been halted as a result of the attack, with significant damage to crushing and grinding equipment. France relies on uranium mined in West Africa, and Niger in particular, to fuel the network of nuclear power plants that provides most of France's electricity.

“We saw a car enter the factory and immediately it exploded,” said Agoumou Idi, a worker at the Areva facility. “The terrorists, probably from MUJAO, took advantage of the fact that the entrance gate was open in order to let in a truck carrying the next shift of workers. They used that opening to enter the heart of our factory and explode their vehicle.”

Speaking to reporters, French President François Hollande responded to the attack stating that French government will do whatever is necessary to protect its interests in Niger. “We will not intervene in Niger as we did in Mali, but we have the same will to co-operate to fight against terrorism and will also protect our interests. Everybody should know that we will let nothing pass and support Niger's authorities to end the hostage taking and annihilate the group that carried out these attacks.”

In an interview with France24, Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou indicated that the attackers came from southern Libya. “I know the Libyan authorities are trying hard. But Libya continues to be a source of instability,” he said.

Niger declared a 72-hour period of national mourning following the attacks.

The twin attacks were allegedly masterminded by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the commander of the Al-Qaeda linked Signed-in-Blood Battalion. Belmokhtar reportedly released a signed statement explaining the reasoning behind the attacks stating, “This is the first of our responses to the statement of the president of Niger—from his masters in Paris—that he eliminated jihad and the mujahedin militarily.”

Members of AQIM kidnapped UN special envoy Robert Fowler from the outskirts of Niger's capital Niamey in 2008 and held him hostage for more than five months. Members of AQIM infiltrated Arlit in

2010 and took seven employees of the French company Areva and its contractor SATOM hostage, including five French nationals.

AQIM is still holding four of the French nationals hostage and threatening to execute them in response to France's intervention in Mali.

France's war in Mali has driven Islamic militants out of Northern Mali and into surrounding countries, including Algeria. In January of this year members of Belmokhtar's Signed-in-Blood Battalion took 800 people hostage at the Tigantourine gas facility near In Amenas, Algeria. After a tense four-day standoff, a rescue operation by Algerian Special Forces resulted in the freeing of more than 700 hostages along with the deaths of 39 hostages and 29 militants.

The attacks last week were the most damaging against French interests in West Africa by Islamic extremists since the beginning of the war in Mali in January.

West African regimes have sent troops into Mali to back up French operations as part of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). The Nigerien government has sent 650 troops to Mali as part of AFISMA.

The Maghreb and Sahel regions have been destabilized by the 2011 NATO bombings of Libya that resulted in the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi. Gaddafi's regime served as a cornerstone of security and economic relations that mitigated conflicts in the Sahel, providing economic aid to ease long-standing tensions between the Tuareg people and the Malian and Nigerien regimes.

Al Qaeda-affiliated elements which flooded Libya in 2011, operating as the West's spearhead to overthrow Gaddafi, are now expanding their influence throughout the Sahel and Western Africa amid the ensuing bloodshed.

The United States and the European imperialist powers are seizing on the consequences of the Libyan war to justify expanding their military operations throughout Africa, under the guise of fighting Al Qaeda and associated forces.

Since 2012, PC-12 surveillance flights have been operating out of Diori Hamani International Airport in Niamey. Predator drones have flown surveillance operations in West Africa since the US and Nigerien governments reached an agreement in January for

establishing a drone base. A contingent of approximately 100 American troops has been dispatched to Niger, ostensibly to operate the drone base.

A US drone base is scheduled to open in Ougadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, later this year, expanding US surveillance capabilities in West Africa. Ougadougou Airport currently serves as a hub of US spying in Africa, utilizing small PC-12 aircraft to fly surveillance missions over Mali, Mauritania, and the Sahara desert.

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