

Canadian troops deploy to Mali to prop up pro-Western puppet government

By Felix Gauthier
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The Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) contingent of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (UNMISMA) announced that it had achieved full operational readiness on August 15, just one day before the publication of the results of Mali's presidential election.

In recent years Canada has provided logistical support to French military operations in Mali and the Sahel region of Northern Africa. But this is the first time that it has committed hundreds of troops on a long-term basis to upholding "stability," i.e., imperialist domination, of a region ravaged by nearly a century-and-a-half of colonial and neo-colonial domination, where levels of human misery remain among the highest in the world.

The Canadian troops in Mali are part of a "peace-keeping mission," under the UNMISMA banner, comprising 12,000 troops and 2,000 police from 56 countries. The mission ostensibly expresses the will of the "international community," but is in reality under the effective control of the western imperialist powers, with France, the traditional colonial power, playing the leading role.

Canada's intervention is entirely in line with this. Presented as an act of humanitarian charity, the CAF operation is part of Canada's efforts to advance its global economic and strategic interests in the context of growing inter-imperialist rivalries, and in particular to secure its claim to a share of the mineral resources of the Sahel region. Canadian companies have long been active in exploiting Mali's gold resources.

Since coming to power in 2015, the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau has expanded Canada's role in the principal US military-strategic offensives—in the oil-rich Middle East and against Russia and China—and, in preparation for future military conflicts, has announced a 70 percent hike in defence spending by 2026.

At the same time, both to provide political cover for this militarist foreign policy and to exploit other opportunities to advance Canada's predatory interests, Trudeau has announced "Canada's return" to UN peacekeeping. While the Conservative opposition has suggested this is a distraction from expanding Canada's military partnership with the US and developing the CAF's war-capabilities, the government and military high command have emphasized that contemporary UN peace-keeping missions are more "peace-making" missions, i.e., counter-insurgency operations; and that "peace-making" provides Canada with the opportunity to deepen military partnerships with

allies, while "putting to good use" the expertise the Canadian military developed through its thirteen years of fighting a neo-colonial war in Afghanistan.

At a UN peacekeeping conference in Vancouver in November 2017, Liberal Defence Minister Harjeet Sajjan and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland announced Canada would deploy some 600 military personnel, military transport aircraft, and up to 150 police officers, in UN missions around the world, including a maximum of 200 per mission.

With more than 250 CAF members now deployed to Mali, this threshold has already been exceeded. Last month, the government also announced the deployment of 20 civilian police officers to Mali, most of whom will be recruited from the Sûreté du Québec (Quebec Provincial Police).

The Canadian troops are accompanied by five heavily-armed Griffons and three Chinook helicopters, reconfigured into medical stations.

Although the Canadian mission is publicly presented as a "medical assistance" and "peacekeeping" endeavor, the CAF high command has insisted on rules of engagement that make clear the CAF will be an active participant in Mali's French-led counter-insurgency war. As one expert interviewed by the *Globe and Mail* noted, "In practice, it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate between peacekeeping operations and anti-terrorist operations". Speaking to the same newspaper, a government representative commented, "For self-defence, we will do whatever is necessary to protect our UN partners and Canadians."

The new "scramble for Africa"

In the five months since the Canadian government announced the Mali deployment, the UNMISMA forces have been drawn ever more deeply into combat, suffering mounting fatalities. Of the 170 casualties that UNMISMA has suffered during the past three years, 70 have occurred since March. These losses have led the UN to designate Mali its most dangerous mission.

Officially, the UN troops are supposed to oversee the so-called peace process enshrined in a treaty signed by Mali's government and Tuareg rebels in Algiers in 2015.

In reality, the UN intervention is part of a new scramble for Africa among the imperialist powers—a scramble that is being spearheaded by the US, France, Germany and Britain, but in which Canada is determined to play a role. As with the operations of the imperialist powers across the continent, their involvement in

Mali is also motivated by their concern about the growth of Chinese influence and investment in Africa.

While its roots lie in Mali's history of colonial and imperialist oppression, the current war arose out of the chaos and destruction wrought by the 2011 NATO regime-change war in Libya—a war led by the United States, but in which Canada played a major role. Forces drawn from the Islamist militias that overthrew the Gaddafi regime with NATO air-support took advantage of the ensuing political vacuum to cross the desert into the Sahel region.

In alliance with separatists drawn from the Tuareg, an impoverished minority in Saharan Africa, many of whose members were chased out of Libya following the fall of the Gaddafi regime, they subsequently launched a rebellion in northern Mali against the government based in Bamako, in Mali's south.

Weakened and in crisis, Mali's government was overthrown in a military coup in January 2012. The following year, Paris stepped in to bolster the Bamako-based regime, deploying troops to Mali under Operation Serval. This was followed in July 2014 by Operation Barkhane, which saw thousands of French troops deployed to countries across the Sahel under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

Four years later, Mali remains mired in communal and ethnic strife. Despite the large foreign military presence, large parts of the country remain devoid of state structures and increasingly experience violence, fueled by social misery and turf wars among the western-sponsored government and rival political forces.

Atrocities in the name of “the war on terror”

Ever more openly, the “war on terror” being mounted by Mali's Bamako-based government with the support of France and its international allies, such as Canada, is becoming a “dirty war” against the Malian people.

The discoveries in recent months of mass graves containing the bodies of dozens of civilians illustrate the real character of Mali's neo-colonial government and the “peace” enforced by UNMISMA. For several years, reports have implicated the Malian Armed Forces (Fama), as well as various forces involved in “anti-terrorist” operations (including the G5-Sahel, comprised of troops from neighbouring countries), in hundreds of arbitrary detentions, cases of torture, and summary executions of civilians.

Since the beginning of the year, Malian government forces have targeted members of the Fulani ethnic group in Mopti, a region that lies northeast of Bamako in the center of the country.

Twenty-five Fulani civilians accused of terrorism were found in a mass grave near Mopti on June 18. In this case, the government admitted the army's involvement. A week later, in the same region, the bodies of a further 32 Fulani civilians were found.

Already last year, the UN Security Council established a general sanctions regime for Mali after the discovery of two mass graves in the Kidal, a Tuareg-dominated region in the country's north. In April, *Human Rights Watch* reported the torture and execution of 27 men in the Mopti region. A UNMISMA press briefing the same month reported at least 95 summary executions since February in Menaka (a part of the Gao region) of persons accused of banditry and terrorism, including children. Many other cases of state abuse

have been reported by local people, but only a fraction of them have been documented or acknowledged.

In July, during the official election period, a demonstration was jointly organized by Fulani and Dogon groups to report on the crisis in the Mopti region. One demonstrator told *RFI*, “People are always afraid, either of armed groups or of the Malian army itself. Currently, the Malian army is the most feared in the Mopti region because of various abuses.”

A recent article in the French daily *Libération* illustrates the alienation of the Malian people from the government and state whose authority the Canadian military is now upholding: “The Fulani have always been hounded by the State, victims of racketeering, despised [...] The repeated abuses of the Malian army reinforce their mistrust of the State, and push some among the youth to turn to [Islamist militias].”

The anti-democratic and unpopular character of Mali's imperialist-backed government underscores the hypocritical and cynical nature of Canada's claims to be mounting a “humanitarian” intervention in the west African country. This false narrative is promoted by the entire political establishment, including the social-democratic NDP.

The two-round presidential election that concluded August 12 was a charade, aimed at providing the Malian government with “democratic” credentials. According to UNMISMA, a massive deployment of the security forces that have routinely resorted to atrocities would ensure the integrity of the vote. In reality, there was little voting in much of the country. In central Mali, where popular opposition to the current government is strongest, violence and threats of violence contributed to a very low turnout.

On August 16, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) was declared re-elected with 67.16 percent of the votes against 32.84 percent for his opponent, Soumaïla Cissé. The latter is accusing the government of vote-buying and ballot-stuffing, and charging that government troops disrupted his campaign, including by arresting campaign leaders.

Nevertheless, UNMISMA was quick to give its stamp of approval for Keïta's re-election, declaring in a press release that “the International Community will continue to work with Mali's elected authorities for lasting peace and genuine security throughout the country.”

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