

Al Qaeda Burkina Faso Hotel Attack: 29 Dead and Many Injured

West African state plunged deeper into the imperialist-backed “war on terrorism”

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Global Research, January 18, 2016

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

A high profile attack by gunmen at a four star hotel in Ouagadougou on Friday, Jan. 15 has highlighted the operations of various so-called “Islamist extremist” organizations in West Africa and the role of Burkina Faso and other states in the region as partners of French and United States counter-terrorism operations.

The attacks took place at the Splendid Hotel, a facility popular with foreign nationals, diplomats and military operatives from European and North American states. Also the Cappuccino Café located close by was sprayed with bullets leaving numerous casualties.

After a standoff for several hours involving over 100 hostages, eyewitnesses said that Burkinabe police and soldiers led by French and U.S. Special Forces stormed the hotel retaking the area.

Paris and Washington maintain military operatives inside this landlocked nation where they coordinate a task force ostensibly designed to track down members of Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and similar organizations. (BBC, Jan. 18)

Hostages who were released after the security operations in Burkina Faso said the gunmen targeted Westerners by killing those who looked to be of European ancestry many of whom laid wounded after being hit by bullets. One U.S. citizen and six Canadians, along with French, Dutch and Swiss nationals were among the 29 people from various countries who died as a result of the attacks.

Burkina Faso’s government declared three days of national mourning beginning on January 17 while announcing that the police and military forces stepped up security measures throughout the country in conjunction with neighboring states such as Mali which experienced similar incidents in recent months and years.

A new head-of-state was elected on November 29 in the aftermath of an attempted coup by the Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP) headed by Gen. Gilbert Diendere. The poll grew out of widespread opposition among the population and elements within the military in October 2014 when long-time former military leader turned politician, Blaise Compaore, sought to extend his term of office and was forced out of Burkina Faso taking refuge in neighboring Ivory Coast.

President Roch Marc Christian Kabore said in a statement in regard to the attacks that “These truly barbaric criminal acts carried out against innocent people, claimed by the

criminal organization al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) seek to destabilize our country and its republican institutions, and to undermine efforts to build a democratic, quiet and prosperous nation.”

One group, the AQIM, has claimed responsibility although these are preliminary reports. During the course of the operations at the hotel and café, the online agency SITE, which monitors posts related to such actions internationally, reported that AQIM had taken responsibility.

Political Power Struggles Contributes to Instability

The impoverished state of Burkina Faso underwent a national uprising in October 2014 that ousted longtime western-backed dictator Blaise Compaore. After the mass demonstrations that created the conditions for Compaore’s removal, another coup occurred illustrating the divisions within the military.

During 2015 in the months leading into the transition process and national elections, Gen. Diendere of the presidential regiment attempted to take power ostensibly in an effort to halt the voting and change the character of the constitutional model. Decisions related to the elections and the composition of the current government was the result of negotiations between various political interests, the military and envoys from the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

In an article written by Pascaline Compaore, a Junior Fellow at the Conflict Prevention and Risks Analysis Division at the Institute of Security Studies in Dakar, Senegal, it noted “Compaoré’s (the former military leader and president) regime depended heavily on the elite security service known as the Regiment of Presidential Security (Régiment de sécurité présidentielle, RSP). Despite the former president’s ousting, the RSP continued to interfere in the political transition process. Some of its members, under the leadership of General Gilbert Diendéré, were responsible for the 17 September 2015 coup attempt, which resulted in the disintegration of the corps. (Jan. 16)

This same report went on saying:

“The coup d’état pointed to a lack of concrete progress in neutralizing the RSP. During the first post-putsch cabinet meeting, it had been decided that the RSP should be disarmed and reintegrated into other army postings. That some of these soldiers could continue to threaten the country’s security and stability remains a cause for concern. The dismantling of the RSP created an important security gap, which must be addressed with urgency given the volatility in the region and the backdrop of instability in the country.”

The Role of AFRICOM and Operation Barkhane

This is not the first of such attacks as there have been two other incidents in the north and west of the country. Mali underwent a similar disturbance in November at a hotel there which houses foreign diplomats and western military personnel.

Prior to the attacks at the hotel and café, the Burkinabe Ministry of Defense released an advisory reporting that approximately 20 armed men killed a policeman and a civilian in an attack on the village of Tin Abao in the northern region of the country. It was not

immediately clear who was behind this separate incident.

The French embassy in December warned its citizens not to travel to a national park in eastern Burkina Faso amid reports that Malian-based Islamist groups had pledged to abduct foreign nationals. One such organization which claimed responsibility for another attack in Mali late last year, Al-Mourabitoun, said in May 2015, it was holding a Romanian man abducted from a mine in northern Burkina Faso in April.

In other reports, 50 unidentified gunmen carried out an offensive operation against a Burkina Faso security brigade near the western border with Mali in October 2015. This attack resulted in three deaths as the then transitional government blamed the incident on disgruntled elements within the RSP who were involved in the attempted coup in September.

Burkina Faso and Mali have become centers in the U.S. and French “war on terrorism”. In addition Niger and Chad have also seen greater deployments of Pentagon and French military troops.

Operation Barkhane, a force based in Chad which is said to have been established to combat Islamist fighters throughout the Sahel region, is stationed in Burkina Faso at the Splendid Hotel. This French-led unit was created in 2014 as the successor to other military contingents in Mali known as Operation Serval and Operation Epervier in Chad.

Barkhane is said to consist of a 3,000-person French force permanently headquartered in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. The operation has representation from five countries, which are the former French colonies of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

These states are described as the “G5 Sahel.” The military operations units are named after a crescent-shaped dune in the Sahara desert.

Burkina Faso until recent years was largely a producer of cotton and other agricultural commodities for export to western states. In the current period the country has emerged as a major center for gold mining becoming the fourth largest producer of the mineral on the African continent.

Neighboring Niger contains large deposits of uranium mined and controlled by the French-based Areva nuclear energy corporation. The U.S. has constructed drone stations and other offensive weaponry in Niger in cooperation with Paris.

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