

Malian War Spreading into Niger: French Military Moves Further Into Northern Region

Special Forces deployed by Paris to Niger to “secure” uranium mines

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Reports emanating from the West African state of Mali indicate that French ground forces accompanied by the national army from the capital of Bamako—along with a small contingent of regional troops from Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, Senegal, Benin, Chad and Nigeria—are moving towards the northern historic city of Timbuktu. Although there has been a media blockade by the French and Malian governments about the impact of the war, details of the conditions taking place inside the country are emerging.

In the northern city of Gao, French and Malian forces claim that they have taken the airport and are moving to occupy the city. A military press release from Paris stated that they were fired on by “Al-Qaeda linked terrorist elements who were destroyed.” (Associated Press, January 28)

Nonetheless, the ministry of defense in France has attempted to sanitize the actual situation in the contested areas. One report asserted that no civilians have been killed in the imperialist military operations, although other news agencies have contradicted these statements.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a press release issued on January 22, stated that “As air bombing and fighting continue in Mali refugees are continuing to cross into neighboring countries. In Mauritania, 4,208 Malian refugees have arrived since January 11.” (UNHCR)

This same media advisory continues noting that “After being registered at the Fassala transit center, they are being transported further inland to the Mbera refugee camp which is already hosting 55,221 people from earlier displacements.” During the same time period 1,300 refugees have arrived in Niger and 1,829 entered Burkina Faso.

Malians arriving in these neighboring states say that they are fleeing air strikes being carried out by French fighter jets. They are complaining about shortages of food, fuel and water. Many new arrivals are traveling in vehicles, but others are on foot and donkeys.

The refugees are anticipating that other members of their families will be crossing the borders very soon. Since the escalation of fighting in the north of Mali in January 2012, which was largely the result of the U.S.-NATO war against Libya, some 147,000 refugees have fled the country.

Inside the country, the UNHCR reports that 229,000 people have been internally displaced

mainly from the areas around Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao. The UN refugee agency is assisting by providing food, water and shelter for the internally displaced as well.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced recently that the international body would not directly participate or authorize the deployment of troops under its authority. Ki-moon cited the humanitarian work carried out by the UN agencies, saying that the organization's direct involvement would jeopardize the safety and security of its personnel.

Meanwhile the United States military is providing C-17 air transport for the French troops and equipment entering Mali. The Obama administration has pledged its support to the invasion and occupation of Mali where the Pentagon has maintained close ties with the national army.

Other NATO states are also participating in the war including Britain, Canada, Denmark and Italy. The Italian government announced on January 28 that it could not continue its support for the French war in Mali without the support of the parliament.

War Spreading to Niger

France announced that it would also deploy Special Forces units to neighboring Niger to guard the Areva uranium mines. The mines provide up to 70 percent of the uranium utilized to power its nuclear power reactors in France.

The mines are located in the areas around the towns of Arlit and Imouraren. Areva maintains operations in Canada, Kazakhstan as well as Niger.

Areva is the second largest uranium mining producer in the world. The mines in Niger are critical to its operations globally.

Just last year in October, the Niger government complained to Areva about the slow pace of its operations aimed at uranium production at the Imouraren site. Several personnel working at the mines were kidnapped during 2010 creating a serious security problem for the firm.

Also there were labor disputes in early 2012 among the construction workers at the Imouraren mines. The delays strained relations with the Niger government which threatened to withdraw support if the firm could not meet its construction deadlines.

France, a former colonial power in Africa, still maintains troops in various states on the continent including Gabon, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Niger and others. The U.S., which is expanding its military presence in Africa with the deployment of an additional 3,500 troops to 35 states, is therefore a natural ally of France in the imperialist expansion in the region.

Africa is becoming even more important in the supply of strategic resources essential for the maintenance of the industrial status of the western states. Oil, natural gas, coltan, platinum and uranium exist in abundance throughout the continent.

In addition to these resources, new findings have taken place over the last year in regard to natural gas and oil in East Africa. Explorations are ongoing in Uganda, Tanzania and Somalia as well as offshore areas in the Indian Ocean.

New Attacks in Algeria

On January 27, there was an attack carried out at the Ain Chikh natural gas pipeline in the Djebahia region of northern Algeria, some 75 miles east of the capital of Algiers. Initial reports indicated that two security guards were killed and five others were wounded.

Algeria was the scene of the seizure of the In Amenas gas field by an Islamist armed group purportedly headed by Mohktar BelMohktar of the "Signatories of Blood." Algerian military forces stormed the plant on two occasions releasing hundreds of workers but the seizure resulted in the deaths of at least 81 people.

The war initiated by France against Mali, purportedly designed to prevent "Islamist extremists" from taking control of the entire country, has worsened the security situation throughout the region. U.S. trained Malian military personnel staged a coup against the democratically elected government in Bamako on March 22, after the army failed to mount an effective counter-attack against the Tuareg fighters in the north.

Opposition Grows to the Imperialist War in West and North Africa

More organizations are coming out against the French bombing and occupation of Mali, the spreading of the war into neighboring states and the support being provided by various NATO states. Workers World issued an editorial in its January 31 issue calling for the withdrawal of imperialist forces from the country.

Also Fightback! News, the website of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO), published a statement opposing the intervention. A demonstration was held on January 23 in Minneapolis involving peace activists organized by the Women Against Military Madness (WAMM) chanting "No U.S. Drones to Mali, No U.S. Intervention in Mali!"

The United National Anti-War Coalition (UNAC), a broad-based coalition of various groups from around the U.S., had already issued a statement opposing intervention in Mali prior to the French bombing and ground invasion which began January 11. The organizations' administrative committee and coordinating committee has held two national conference calls on the situation inside Mali and the region.

UNAC will be issuing another statement updating its position on the current crisis. Plans are also underway for a national tour featuring people from the U.S. and Pakistan who are opposing the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) drone program that is devastating countries throughout Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

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