

Washington Steps up Africa Intervention

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The Obama administration is “markedly widening its role” in the escalating French-led neo-colonial war in Mali, according to a report published Monday in the *Wall Street Journal*.

According to unnamed French officials cited in the report, US Reaper drones have been utilized to track down alleged Islamist fighters in the Ifoghas mountain region of northern Mali, supplying targeting information for some 60 French airstrikes in just the past week.

A force of 1,200 French troops alongside another 800 US-trained special forces soldiers from Chad and units of Mali’s own army have engaged in fierce clashes with the insurgents, who have operated in the region for many years and are well acquainted with its terrain.

Given the new, more violent stage of the war—which as of Sunday had claimed the lives of three French Foreign Legionnaires and dozens of African troops—the French Foreign Ministry announced last week that it would not withdraw its 4,000-strong expeditionary force “in haste,” effectively signaling that a withdrawal previously scheduled for later this month would almost certainly be postponed. French officials told the Associated Press that the country’s troops would remain in Mali at least until July.

Chadian officials claimed over the weekend that the country’s troops had killed Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who is alleged to have led the armed group that seized the Amenas oilfield in Algeria in January. Belmokhtar is said to have links with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

“Chadian forces have totally destroyed the principal bases of the jihadists in the Adrar massif of the Ifoghas [mountains], to be more precise in the town of Ametetai,” Chad’s military command announced on Saturday. The announcement came one day after Chad’s president, Idriss Déby, claimed that another AQIM leader, Abou Zeid, had been killed in the same operation.

French and US officials were more cautious about the claims, saying that they had been unable to verify the killings. Washington has extensive experience with reporting alleged jihadists having been killed, only to have them turn up again very much alive.

French military commander Adm. Edouard Guillaud cautioned in an interview on Monday that while the deaths were “likely,” the French forces did not recover the bodies of the two men. Guillaud urged “extreme caution,” warning, “there is always the risk of being contradicted later by a dated video.”

The stepped-up use of US drones in the Mali war follows last month’s announcement of the deployment of at least 100 US troops to neighboring Niger, where an agreement was reached with the local government to allow Washington to set up a drone base on the

country's territory. While presently, the US claims that it is only flying unarmed surveillance drones, the establishment of the base creates the conditions for the Obama administration to spread its campaign of remote-control killings throughout West and Central Africa.

While justifying its intervention as a response to the growing presence of Al Qaeda-linked forces—which overran northern Mali only after they were utilized by Washington as ground troops in the US-NATO war to topple the regime of Col. Muammar Gaddafi in neighboring Libya—the real aims being pursued by US imperialism are asserting US hegemony over the region's extensive oil, uranium and other mineral wealth and countering the rising economic influence of China.

The *Journal* article quoted an unnamed Western official as stating that the US role in Mali represented a “rare North African success story,” in which Washington had rolled out a new “counterterrorism strategy of working ‘by, with and through’ local forces.”

In other words, US imperialism is attempting to prosecute its predatory campaign in Africa by counting on the region's servile national bourgeois elites to provide African troops as a proxy force.

“In recent years,” the *Journal* reports, “a Joint US Special Operations Task Force in Africa has provided Chad's Special Anti-Terrorism Group, the unit involved in the operations last week, that allegedly killed Mr. Belmokhtar and Mr. Zeid, with equipment, training and logistical support.”

Chad has reported that 26 soldiers from the unit have been killed since the launching of the offensive in Mali.

Chadian officials acknowledged that the Chadian unit fighting in Mali, the Special Anti-Terrorism Group, had been trained by US Green Berets. According to the *Journal*, US officials claimed that “American forces didn't accompany the Chadian unit into Mali.” Any such direct involvement by US forces in ground fighting in Mali would undoubtedly be carried out covertly.

In addition to the Chadian unit, other US-trained African troops are being readied for possible deployment to Mali.

Gen. Carter Ham, the chief of AFRICOM, the US military command overseeing the African continent, flew last week to Mauritania for closed-door meetings with the country's president, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, and senior military officials. He also addressed Mauritanian, US and French soldiers engaged in combined military exercises in southern Mauritania, near the border with Mali.

The exercise, known as “Flintlock 2013,” is part of an annual series organized by Pentagon since 2000, before the so-called “global war on terror” and the invocation of Al Qaeda as a pretext for worldwide interventions.

On Monday, Abdel Aziz, speaking at a joint press conference with Niger's president, Mahamadou Issoufou, said that he was prepared to send Mauritanian troops to Mali “to provide stability and security.” He said his government would “take on this responsibility as soon as possible,” while adding that it had already deployed troops to the country's border with Mali to block supply lines and escape routes for insurgents there.

While the US-French intervention in Mali has been cast as a humanitarian venture aimed at rescuing the Malian people from Islamists, the reality is that the war has unleashed immense human suffering.

The United Nations refugee agency has reported that some 40,000 Malians have fled the fighting, seeking safety in refugee camps in neighboring Burkina Faso. The bulk of those crowded into the refugee camps in Dijbo, in northern Burkina Faso, are Tuaregs, who left to escape the French bombing and out of fear that Malian troops would exact retribution on the minority population for having risen in revolt against the central government.

Another 4,000 have fled into Mauritania since France, backed by Washington, launched its military intervention on January 11. A week after the initiation of the neo-colonial war, the United Nations high commissioner for refugees warned that "in the near future there could be up to 300,000 people additionally displaced inside Mali, and over 400,000 additionally displaced in the neighboring countries." This assessment is rapidly being confirmed.

"We are scared of reprisal killings," Malian refugees told the UN news agency IRIN. "We are scared of attacks from Malian soldiers. No one dares return." The news agency reported that farming families had been unable to tend their fields because of the fighting and had fled in fear of starvation. It also reported that, while schools have reopened in the city of Timbuktu, they are largely empty because so many students and teachers have joined the surge of refugees.

"Who can assure our safety, our security? No one. I do not have confidence in anyone," Timbuktu school director Amhedo Ag Hamama, now volunteering as a teacher in Mbéra refugee camp in eastern Mauritania, told IRIN.

Stocks of food and water are proving inadequate to deal with the number of refugees, threatening to produce a humanitarian catastrophe.

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