

Britain, US escalate war aid as France advances into northern Mali

Alex Lantier
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The imperialist powers are escalating the war in Mali. Britain has pledged to deploy troops and the US is planning a base for drone aircraft in the region, while French troops are advancing into the rebellious north of its former colony.

British authorities said they would deploy hundreds of troops, concentrating on training French-backed Malian government forces and providing “force protection” for the trainers. British Special Forces are already reportedly in Mali, working with the French. Britain has also sent C-17 transport aircraft to help France deploy troops to Mali.

The announcement came after talks Sunday between British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President François Hollande. A Downing Street spokesman said, “The prime minister made clear that we fully support the French government’s actions The prime minister went on to explain that we are keen to provide further assistance where we can, depending on what French requirements there may be.”

The United States is also extending military assistance to France, offering on Saturday to refuel French warplanes with US tanker airplanes after talks between US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. Many French fighter-bombers operate from bases in France, flying to Mali through Algerian air space and bombing targets in Mali. This places them on the outer edge of their operating radius, requiring refueling.

At the same time, Washington is in discussions with Niger and other neighboring countries of Mali to find a possible base for US drones. The US already deploys small manned surveillance planes from a base in the military side of the Ouagadougou airport in Burkina Faso. This is one of a series of informal bases tied to the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), whose only

official base in Africa is a joint Franco-American base in the East African coastal city-state of Djibouti.

US officials said that drones flying from Niger or Burkina Faso would monitor the flow of supplies and weapons from Libya across the Sahara to northern Mali.

They could also attack ground targets, extending the US war of remote-controlled assassination—currently waged in Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of the Arab Peninsula and East Africa—to the Sahel. The *New York Times* reported that Washington has “not ruled out conducting missile strikes at some point if the threat worsens.”

AFRICOM Commander General Carter Ham declined to comment on the US basing of forces in Niger, claiming the subject was “too operational for me to confirm or deny.” However, Niger’s president, Mahamadou Issoufou, has stressed that he is willing to establish a “long-term strategic relationship with the US.”

French Special Forces also recently deployed to Niger to protect French nuclear energy firm Areva’s huge uranium mines there (See: “France sends troops to secure Niger uranium mines”).

The escalation of drone and commando warfare across West Africa highlights the sordid corporate and strategic interests driving the war in Mali, and the responsibility of the imperialist powers for creating the conditions that provoked the war in the first place.

NATO’s promotion of Islamist forces in the 2011 Libya war to destroy the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi stoked ethnic and sectarian warfare in the Sahara. Now, Islamist forces, traffickers tied both to Al Qaeda and to the French-backed Malian regime in Bamako, and local ethnic-nationalist groups are re-supplying themselves with arms stolen from Libyan

weapons dumps and trafficked across the Sahara. The response from Washington, Paris and London is to further deploy forces and escalate violence across West Africa.

France is invading northern Mali, which broke away from the corrupt junta of Captain Amadou Sanogo in the capital, Bamako, to re-impose Bamako's authority. Yesterday and over the weekend, French troops occupied key northern Malian towns after a bombing campaign last week targeting the towns of Lere, Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao.

Reports suggest that opposition fighters—including both ethnic-Tuareg and Islamist forces from various militias—are abandoning the towns after token or no resistance. They are either fleeing towards Kidal, a remote town 300 miles northeast of Gao and the last to remain under opposition control, or to the countryside, to prepare guerrilla resistance.

On Sunday, Gao—the largest of the towns, with roughly 85,000 inhabitants—fell to French and Malian government troops, who had first seized its airstrip. French military sources said they killed 25 Islamist fighters in Gao.

Yesterday, the Tuareg-nationalist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) signaled that it wanted to organize a truce in Kidal with invading French forces.

French forces also took control of Timbuktu, a historic center of the region's medieval African empires.

Before French troops entered the town, Islamist militias reportedly burned two libraries in Timbuktu containing thousands of priceless historic manuscripts dating back to the 13th century. Like other deeply reactionary acts of vandalism by US-backed Islamists who later fell out with the West—such as the destruction of Kabul's cultural heritage by Afghan anti-Soviet mujahedin in 1992, and the Taliban destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha sculptures in 2001—such crimes point to the terrible implications of imperialism's manipulation and promotion of Islamist jihadist forces.

Attempts to use the crimes of the West's former Islamist proxies in Africa to justify France's war in Mali are profoundly hypocritical. Paris routinely ignores such crimes when they are committed by forces it is supporting. This includes the Islamist Syrian insurgency, which attacked historic sites such as the

souk of Aleppo. It is also a cynical cover for the reactionary character of the war.

With France blocking journalists from covering the war zones, reports of ethnic killings are being largely ignored in the mass media. On Saturday, however, Amnesty International (AI) released a statement accusing French-backed Malian forces of “violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the extrajudicial executions of Tuareg civilians, indiscriminate shelling of a Tuareg nomadic camp, and killing livestock on which the nomadic population rely for survival.”

The Bamako regime, whose authority France is intervening to restore, is thoroughly corrupt. Having worked closely with the International Monetary Fund and French capital to privatize and eliminate northern Mali's limited social infrastructure since the 1980s, it turned northern Mali into a region where a small elite amassed fortunes based largely on criminal activities. These prominently include drug and kidnapping rackets, from which Malian officials derive considerable profits.

According to the British *Guardian*, the most expensive area of Gao is called “Cocainebougou,” or “Cocaine-town,” due to the fortunes realized from shipping Latin American cocaine through the South Atlantic and West Africa on towards Europe. The paper commented that their source, a police officer, “admitted there was collusion between smugglers and state officials.”



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