

Mali terror groups fight flagging morale
By: Jemal Oumar for Magharebia
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Ahead of a possible international military intervention, terrorist groups in Mali's troubled north are waging a propaganda battle to shore up support.

Oumar Ould Hamaha, a prominent leader of Ansar al-Din, which controls northern Mali, threatened to carry out "acts of retaliation against the countries that are considering intervention in this region to fight the militants, as well as those who support these countries, including France," AFP reported July 19th.

"We inform everyone that we are ready to face any army. We warn in advance that all states that send troops will receive a ruthless response," AFP quoted Ould Hamaha as saying. "We have hundreds of fighters for martyrdom operations that are waiting for the order."

Ould Hamaha threatened France directly, saying the country was "unable to intervene on the ground and is only using other countries".

"If we are attacked, France will be attacked," the terror leader added.

He concluded by saying, "The Algerian position is wise due to its experience in such affairs, unlike some other countries that the West corrupted."

According to analysts, the threats from Ansar al-Din are an attempt to bolster the extremist group's support base in preparation for any international military response to the Mali crisis.

"The terrorist organisations realise more than ever that their presence in a public and regular way in the region of northern Mali has become a matter of time only, because the world will not keep silent about their acts," said Abdul-Hamid Ansari, an analyst and researcher on Islamic groups in northern Mali.

The researcher said he considered the statements "a direct response to these armed initiatives, as a kind of self-talk".

He added that the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) was rumoured to "preparing to leave the city Gao and to disappear into the desert, which is what the rest of the other forces will do".

Hajj Ould Ibrahim, an expert on regional conflicts and a researcher in communication sciences, held a similar view. "I think the menacing statements by leaders of al-Qaeda and groups allied with them in northern Mali are trial balloons to measure the readiness of the countries that intend to intervene in northern Mali to eliminate the presence of terrorist organisations," he told Magharebia.

"The local population's hatred of those terrorist organisations as a result of their cruelty is among the factors that can be in favour of any military intervention to expel them from the area," Ould Ibrahim added.

Journalist Yacob Ould Mohamed Salem, a specialist in terrorism cases and editor of Senegal News, told Magharebia that he did not rule out that terror groups in northern Mali could resort "to surprise methods targeting the countries that confront them from within, especially if it becomes clear to them that they will lose control of the Azawad".