

Mali leaders agree to help from foreign troops
By Robbie Corey-Boulet, The Associated Press
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ABIDJAN, IVORY COAST — Mali would welcome a West African military intervention force, not just to help recapture the north from rebels enforcing strict Islamic law but also to assist in other parts of the country, its military chief of staff said Thursday.

Ibrahim Dembele's comments came after a two-day emergency meeting of West African military chiefs of staff in Ivory Coast to discuss the proposed intervention in Mali, where the democratically elected president was ousted in a coup back in March.

Coup leader Capt. Amadou Sanogo had initially expressed opposition to accepting assistance from foreign troops, and Thursday's announcement appeared to be a softening of that position.

Ethnic Tuareg rebels took control of Mali's north after the coup, but have since been driven out by Islamist rebels who want to impose a strict version of Islamic law. An estimated 300,000 people have fled the region.

Dembele said Thursday that Malian officials would agree to "security assistance" in addition to help in taking back the troubled north.

"Before deployment of the foreign troops, there should be public awareness about the mission's objective," he said. "Once people understand, it will facilitate the presence of foreign troops."

The proposal for a 3,000-member military intervention force is still awaiting approval from the U.N. Security Council.

On Thursday, officials declined to give a timeframe for such an operation, though they emphasized that all efforts would be conducted alongside Malian forces.

The International Crisis Group issued a report earlier this month warning against military intervention in Mali from the West African regional bloc known as ECOWAS.

"ECOWAS countries willing to send troops do not appear to fully grasp the complex social situation in northern Mali, and underestimate the high risk of inter-tribal settling of scores that would result from external military intervention," the report said.

But Salamatou Hussaini Suleiman, ECOWAS commissioner for political affairs, dismissed suggestions that intervention could do more harm than good.

"Look at what is happening in the north of the country," Suleiman said. "Without serious action taken, that place is going to turn into a haven for terrorists, for drug peddlers, for international criminals. And that is not only threatening to the ECOWAS region but to the entire international community."

Mali's decision to accept the troops means the only remaining hurdle is approval from the U.N. Security Council, said Sumaila Bakayoko, chief of staff of Ivory Coast's armed forces,

ECOWAS leaders said Thursday that the proposed mission would ensure an orderly transition to a new government, strengthen Mali's armed forces and reverse gains made by rebels in the country's north.

While the junta leaders have handed power to an interim government, they have continued to wield their authority in the country. The regional bloc previously had given Mali's interim government a deadline of July 31 to establish a unity government.

The country's interim president, Dioncounda Traore, sought medical treatment in France in May after he was badly beaten by protesters not long after taking office. An official, who spoke Thursday on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about the matter, said Traore now planned to leave on Friday.

"You'll all remember what happened in the past when the interim president was assaulted, so those kinds of issues will not occur once we have a stand-by force in place in Mali," Suleiman said.

Dioncounda was beaten by protesters allied with Sanogo, and soldiers who had been assigned to protect the interim president allowed the demonstrators to break through the security cordon.

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