



African Union to take Mali to UN Security Council-source

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* African Union favours U.N.-backed force for Mali

* France says risk Mali could become "sanctuary for terrorism"

By John Irish

PARIS, May 30 (Reuters) - The African Union plans to refer the situation in Mali to the United Nations Security Council so that it can create a framework for tackling the worsening crisis there, a diplomatic source close to the AU president said on Wednesday.

Mali, once regarded as a fine example of African democracy, collapsed into chaos after soldiers toppled the president in March, leaving a power vacuum in the north that enabled rebels to take control of nearly two-thirds of the country.

A regionally backed transitional government has been set up in Bamako to organise new presidential elections within a year, though supporters of the ruling military junta oppose the plan.

"The African Union will go to the Security Council and then it will be up to it to find the right format for a resolution and if it deems military support necessary," said the source close to Thomas Boni Yayi, the Benin president and head of the African Union.

He said it was not clear when the issue would be taken to the United Nations.

An agreement between northern Mali's MNLA Tuareg rebels and the al Qaeda-linked Islamist group Ansar Dine to create an Islamic state in northern Mali's Azawad desert has hit trouble over how strictly to impose sharia, Islamic law.

The separatist MNLA wants a moderate form of sharia, while Ansar Dine would like to impose a more hardline version, using punishments such as the amputation of hands and heads for certain crimes.

The West African group ECOWAS said it rejected the idea of a separate Islamic state in northern Mali, and new French President Francois Hollande urged African leaders on Tuesday to ask the U.N. Security Council to help restore stability in the region.

Hollande said France, the former colonial ruler, would be ready to help restore stability in Mali if there was a Security Council resolution.

Yayi, who met Hollande on Tuesday, was quoted by French media as saying he wanted a UN-backed force to intervene in Mali along the lines of the African Union force in Somalia.

France has previously said it would provide logistical support for an African operation and new Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told reporters on Wednesday that there was a real risk of the region turning into a "West African Afghanistan."

"We can't let this area become a new sanctuary for terrorism," Le Drian told a news conference. "There are real risks. We have to act, but the right players to do that are ECOWAS, the African Union and the Security Council.

Paris has already trained troops in Mauritania and Niger to fight al Qaeda's North African wing in the region.

"It's a difficult, dangerous zone and we are looking at it extremely carefully," Le Drian said, declining to say whether French troops already based in West Africa were being increased or repositioned for an eventual intervention. (Reporting By John Irish; Editing by Tim Pearce)

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