

Mali: Intervention Options in Northern Mali

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UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Peacekeepers in Côte d'Ivoire. (file photo)

Bamako — The African Union (AU) and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) have been taking a dual-track approach in Mali in recent weeks - diplomatic negotiations with the rebels and Islamist groups who have taken over the north, while calling on the UN Security Council to draft a resolution and approve a military mission. Analysts question whether either option is likely to work, and if so, which?

"Using force is not the first option. The first option remains to get results through negotiations with the ones with legitimate demands," ECOWAS Commission President Kadré Désiré Ouédrogo said last week.

Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré, negotiator for ECOWAS, has pursued talks with spokespersons of both Ansar Dine, an Islamist group that wants to apply Sharia law throughout Mali, and MNLA rebels (Movement National pour la Liberation d'Azawad), which wants to create a separate state in the north. Members of Ansar Dine told reporters this week that they accept mediation by ECOWAS through Burkina Faso, but will not act as conduits between ECOWAS and other Al Qaeda-affiliated groups working in northern Mali.

Islamist and Tuareg groups seized control of northern Mali in April just after rebels in the Malian army launched a takeover in the capital, Bamako, ousting the civilian government. Civilian power was restored in the south on 12 April, but concerns about Ansar Dine's links with extremist groups, including Al Qaeda, have led several analysts to describe the region as a potential "West African Afghanistan".

Ansar Dine and the MNLA co-exist in an uneasy alliance, with evidence emerging of serious hostility towards Ansar Dine from within the MNLA; and clashes broke out between the groups in the northern region of Kidal in early June.

ECOWAS objectives are to preserve Mali's territorial integrity, maintain the liberty and human rights of Malians, and create a setting in which the region can manage the country's humanitarian crisis, according to Burkina Faso's foreign minister, Djibril Bassolé.

Thus far, the regional body focused its main energies in removing from power Junta head Capt. Amadou Sanogo and his National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy. In March ECOWAS imposed comprehensive sanctions against Sanogo; suspended Mali from the regional body; recalled ambassadors from ECOWAS countries; closed borders with Mali and imposed a travel ban on the coup leaders.

UN assessing resolution

Should diplomatic efforts fail, ECOWAS spokespeople said, major troop contributions by Niger, Nigeria and Senegal meant there were 3,270 troops ready to intervene once a UN resolution has been passed.

On 14 June the AU and ECOWAS called for a UN mission under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which would legitimize the use of force to achieve its goals and protect civilians. UN Security Council (UNSC) members demanded further clarification on the role of the Malian army in the force, as well as the size, goals, and operational capacity of the force.

On 18 June UNSC declared its readiness to consider backing an African intervention force, although the decision by the 15 UNSC members was not unanimous.

Gilles Yabi, West Africa Director of the International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution think-tank, assessed the UNSC's caution: "The situation in northern Mali is quite different from other situations where a peacekeeping mission can be deployed to monitor a ceasefire, for example... Before approving a mission, the UNSC needs to be sure that ECOWAS has the means to achieve its ends. Previous situations show that the ECOWAS force has serious limitations in terms of logistics, communication equipment, and intelligence capacities, which are essential assets for an operation in a northern Mali," he told IRIN.

Hostility

The current Malian transition government is pushing for a negotiated process before contemplating a military response, and has never given approval to an ECOWAS mission. However, over the past week it has boosted contact with ECOWAS, France and Algeria to discuss the issue. A delegation of ECOWAS military strategists is expected next week in Bamako to discuss collaboration with the Malian army.

The Malian government would have to convince a population that is largely hostile to a foreign intervention. "ECOWAS is not welcome here," said Ousmane Maiga, a retired teacher in Bamako. Several protests against an ECOWAS intervention have been held in the capital since the crisis began.

Critics say an ECOWAS force of some 3,000 troops would be unable to regain control of the north - it would be more likely to gain control of some cities and towns, leaving rebel and Islamist groups to remain in the area. Further, taking such a tack would not address the underlying grievances that led to the rebellion in the first place. Many of the MNLA's main grievances draw on the memories of past atrocities committed by national armies, the failure of peace agreements to deliver security and release from poverty, and the squandering or misappropriation of funds by national and local authorities. Added to this has been resentment of the government's alleged accommodation with AQMI and its attempts to smear Tuaregs as terrorist accomplices.

West says Africa to lead

The new French President, François Hollande, said France would be ready to support an ECOWAS military operation, as "there is a threat of terrorist groups taking root in northern Mali", but it was "up to African nations to take the initiative in leading any military operation". France's Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, after meeting with his Italian counterpart, on 18 June asked for European direct action in the Malian crisis, without clarifying what this meant. The US Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie

Carson, has told reporters the US is ready to support African intervention if the goals are spelled out clearly.

Other Western nations have remained silent about supporting any type of mission, as non-African military support is a sensitive issue. With Islamists and AQIM-affiliated groups controlling major parts of the north, a foreign intervention might trigger more hostility from terrorists and Islamists. "It is not impossible that some of the armed groups in the north would like to see such Western engagement, and use it as a way to mobilize anti-Western foreign support and internationalize the conflict. It is also not clear that Malians in Bamako and the south want to see visible military activity from Western countries," Yabi noted.

Foreign military cooperation, mainly from France and the United States, has stalled since the coup, and staff and money for security cooperation has been withdrawn.

Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika offered logistical support to a Malian military operation on 13 June. Algeria could provide airlift capabilities, which the Malian army lacks, said a military analyst, but Algeria is maintaining its position of non-interference, even though seven of its diplomats were kidnapped in the northern town of Gao by the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a small Islamist AQIM-affiliated group. President Bouteflika and Prime Minister Diarra have not provided more details on the deal.

AQIM's origins are usually traced back to the crisis in Algeria in 1992, and human rights activists, academics and others repeatedly questioned the role of Algeria's intelligence service, the Département du Renseignement de la Sécurité (DRS), accusing it of infiltrating armed movements and controlling key terrorist operatives.

The Mauritanian government, which has over recent years launched robust military operations to stamp out AQIM activity in its territory, is taking a deterrent approach, stepping up surveillance on the Mali border. European and American security actors are also providing some technical help to support a containment strategy to try to protect the Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso borders from infiltration by military groups.

Niger and Burkina Faso have reiterated the need for an ECOWAS-led solution. The EU Military Committee has sent security experts and military analysts to neighbouring Niger as part of a pledge of US\$190 million by the European Commission to improve security in the Sahel.

Malian Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra conducted a review of the army in Ségou, central Mali, on 1 June. According to the Malian Ministry of Defence, 4,000 Malian soldiers are ready to be deployed to the north - 1,000 of them near Nema in Mauritania, an important crossroads town close to the border of southern Mali, and 2,000 of them to Sévaré in the Mopti region, an important crossroads town with access to Gao and Timbuktu to the north, Segou and Bamako to the southwest, and Burkina Faso to the south. Observers have noted military preparations in Sévaré.

A Western military attaché who asked to remain unnamed was sceptical that a unilateral Malian intervention would work, due to low capacity. "They haven't tackled the problems that brought about Mali's defeat in the north," he told IRIN. The Malian army lost control of northern Mali within 48 hours of the coup in Bamako on 22 March, when unranked soldiers toppled the military hierarchy.

Over the past few months Tuareg rebels have seized several large weapons caches from Malian military in northern garrisons which were added to the arsenal they brought back from the Libyan conflict.

The US has run a military support operation, Africa Command (AFRICOM), in Mali, Mauritania and parts of Niger for years, spending millions dollars on anti-terrorist military training in Mali. Many of the trainees became leaders of the coup in Mali according to local observers and journalists.

An important regional anti-terrorist training exercise - Flintlock - which included several African and foreign forces, was in preparation and due to be held in February 2012, but was cancelled because of the rebellion in Mali. Several intelligence-gathering planes have flown over northern Mali from Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, as part of a surveillance system named Creek Sand by AFRICOM.

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