

Mali Focus of West African Leaders' Meeting

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Several West African leaders meet Saturday to review the situation in Mali and discuss ways of retaking the north from Islamist militants.

Malian military officers and political parties have been invited to the meeting, hosted by regional bloc ECOWAS in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou.

ECOWAS director of external relations, Abdel Fatau Musah, said participants will discuss broadening the interim government in southern Mali to give it greater legitimacy.

He told VOA that the government will not include the Islamists in the north.

"ECOWAS has made it very clear that we are not going to negotiate with terrorist organizations," he said. "We are determined to flush them out of the northern part of Mali. The broad-based government we are talking about is basically to be anchored around the existing political parties, identifiable civil society organizations, and respected technocrats in the country."

ECOWAS has asked the United Nations to authorize a regional military force to fight the Islamists. The U.N. Security Council said this week it would consider the request but asked for more information about the mission's objectives and means.

A Malian army spokesman told VOA that the army is "preparing to go north" but added there was no specific date for when they would do so.

Mali's interim government was established soon after soldiers toppled President Amadou Toumani Toure in a March 22 coup. Tuareg separatists and Islamists seized control of northern Malian cities the following week.

The three major cities are now under control of the Islamists. Members of the militant group Ansar Dine drew international condemnation when they destroyed historic Muslim shrines in the city of Timbuktu this week.

ECOWAS invited interim president Dioncounda Traore to come to Saturday's meeting, but Mali's communications ministry told VOA Friday that Mr. Traore will not attend.

Mr. Traore has not returned to Mali since going to Paris for medical treatment following an attack by a pro-military junta mob in May.