

Tuareg rebels killed in battle with Malian troops

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Three people were killed on Friday during clashes between the MNLA Tuareg separatist group and the Malian army in the north of the country, the MNLA said in a statement, accusing the Malian army of violating a ceasefire agreement.

The MNLA said on its website that the Malian army arrested "several civilians, and executed three of them, wounding three others," near Menaka.

The Malian defense ministry, however, describing the same incident, said a group of armed bandits had attacked a Malian army patrol in the same area.

"Three were killed and four were wounded. A vehicle, arms, ammunition and communications equipment were seized," the defense ministry said in a statement late on Friday.

Tuareg rebels seized control of the northern town of Kidal and some surrounding areas after a French-led military offensive in January drove out Islamist militants who had occupied northern Mali.

The army has clashed several times since with the rebels, despite a June ceasefire deal to allow presidential elections to go ahead in the remote region in Mali's desert north, while MNLA fighters had agreed to remain in barracks in Kidal.

A Malian army official told Reuters that MNLA fighters attacked a joint patrol of Malian and U.N. troops near the town of Menaka early on Friday.

"The MNLA fighters fired first. The patrol returned fire. There were up to three killed among the MNLA," the official in Gao - northern Mali's biggest city - told Reuters by phone earlier on Friday, requesting not to be identified.

Olivier Salgado, spokesman for the U.N. mission in Mali, confirmed the incident.

"There was at least one death on the MNLA side. Two suspects were arrested and one vehicle with arms on board was seized," Salgado told Reuters by phone from the capital, Bamako, saying it was possible more than one Tuareg fighter was killed. He said the circumstances of the incident were being investigated.

Menaka resident Aliou Chabane said the army was ambushed while on its way to respond to an earlier MNLA attack on a truck transporting civilians.

"MNLA opened fire on the army, who retaliated. Three MNLA fighters were killed," Chabane said.

Menaka is about 400 km (249 miles) south of Kidal, but still in Mali's vast desert north.

Mali imploded last year when the Tuareg rebels took up arms in the north, triggering a coup in Bamako.

Islamists took advantage of the chaos and seized the north, stoking fears in the West that the zone would become a launch pad for militant attacks and a safe haven for criminal gangs operating alongside the various rebel groups.

The U.N. force in Mali, known as MINUSMA, is supposed to take over from an African mission and French forces and has the job of stabilizing the country.

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