

Nearly 100 Rebels Are Reported Killed in Mali Battle
By Scott Seyare, The New York Times
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PARIS — Nearly 100 Islamist fighters were killed in a firefight last week in the rugged northern reaches of [Mali](#), the Chadian military announced on Sunday, in what appears to have been the single most deadly ground battle since the Malian war began in mid-January.

The Chadian military, which has provided about 2,000 soldiers to fight alongside French, Malian and other African forces, said that 23 of its soldiers and 93 militants were killed and that 3 Chadian soldiers were wounded in the heavy firefight on Friday. On Saturday, the military had announced an initial tally of 65 militants and 13 Chadian soldiers killed.

The conflict in Mali began when French forces intervened to stop a southward surge by fighters from a constellation of armed Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda's regional affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Those groups had overrun northern Mali — a desert expanse about the size of [France](#) — last year, imposing a violent and repressive iteration of Islamic law on local populations.

Many of the fighters, who are estimated by officials and analysts to total between 2,000 and 3,000, have retreated to their redoubts in the mountainous far north, near the Algerian border. French, Chadian and Malian forces are conducting coordinated operations in the area, according to the French military spokesman, Col. Thierry Burkhard.

The French authorities believe several French hostages may be held in the region. French aircraft were “in the area” and “able to intervene” on Friday, Colonel Burkhard said, though he refused to say whether or not they had aided the Chadians. The French have conducted regular airstrikes in upper Mali in recent weeks, generally targeting what have been described as arms depots and an occasional vehicle.

The French are [eager to cede](#) their leadership in the conflict, however, and French officials, including President François Hollande, have called the fighting in the far north the final phase. A withdrawal of French troops, who number about 4,000 in Mali, may begin within weeks, the officials said.

They envision the creation of a United Nations peacekeeping force made up mostly of Africans to assume security responsibilities in the country once the French have left. A resolution to create that force, which could number about 6,000 peacekeepers, is being drafted, a French diplomatic official said on Sunday, requesting anonymity because of the delicacy of the discussions. France hopes to have the resolution approved within about three weeks.

It would also create a permanent French force based in Mali or nearby and able to deploy quickly if needed, the diplomatic official said.

But the peacekeeping mission would require “at least two months” of preparations before deploying, the official said, and would deploy only once Mali had been “sufficiently secured.” It remains unclear how those terms would be defined, however, and French officials have offered little indication as to what they would consider a successful outcome for the French intervention in Mali.

“The idea is to secure the situation to a maximum” before peacekeepers are deployed, the diplomatic official said, though “pockets” of Islamist fighters will “surely” remain.

“‘Sufficiently secured’ does not mean Switzerland,” the official said.