

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3809 | DECEMBER 21, 2012

Mali: Military Force Is Not the Solution

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Yesterday, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed a resolution authorizing the deployment of an African-led military force to rebuild Mali's military and support the recovery of northern Mali, currently controlled by terrorist and extremist entities.

Permitting the use of force against Mali's occupiers will result in an unnecessary delay in the restoration of government. The United States should be cautious regarding its commitment to any military operation and withhold contributions to the mission before the reinstatement of civilian government is guaranteed.

Descent into Chaos. Last March, former Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré was overthrown in a military coup by a leader led by a junior army officer, Captain Amadou Sango. In the preceding months, Mali's army had suffered significant losses at the

hands of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a separatist group based in the northern part of the country that benefited from fighters and weapons returning from the fallen Muammar Qadhafi regime in Libya. Frustration with the lack of support from Bamako was a key motivation behind the coup.

Following Touré's resignation and the army's retreat, northern Mali—an area the size of Texas—became a gaping security vacuum. By April, the secular MNLA aligned itself with the Islamist militant group Ansar Dine ("Defenders of the Faith") and declared their captured territory, "Azawad," to be an independent state.

This alliance quickly fractured as the two groups were unable to reconcile their ideological, political, and religious differences. Ansar Dine sidelined the MNLA and is currently operating alongside al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its offshoot, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa. Other groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, are reportedly operating in the region as well.

Together, these groups have enforced Sharia law across northern Mali. Brutal punishments—including public floggings, amputations, and stonings—have taken place. In July, some of the Sahel's most prized

cultural sites in Timbuktu were ransacked because of their adherence to Sufi tradition.

Cue the United Nations.

Immediately after the coup, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) proposed military action to prevent northern Mali from becoming a safe haven for terrorism. In October, the UNSC approved a resolution providing military and security planners to assist ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) in drafting a plan for military intervention in coordination with Mali's transitional government. The resolution requested that the plans be submitted to the Security Council for consideration in 45 days.¹

In November, ECOWAS and the AU proposed an African-led international military support mission in Mali. However, according to a report by the U.N. Secretary General, the plan failed to answer "fundamental questions on how the force would be led, sustained, trained, equipped and financed."² Despite these misgivings, the UNSC unanimously approved Resolution 2085 on December 20 authorizing military action to liberate northern Mali from al-Qaeda-linked terrorists.

The resolution outlines a two-track approach focusing on a political

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3809>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

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process and a security process. Training for the Malian army by the European Union and other U.N. members prior to troop deployment—expected in September or October of next year—is also emphasized.³

The resolution calls upon the international community to provide funding and support for the African-led International Support Mission in Mali, possibly facilitated by a new U.N.-managed trust fund. The U.N. has also suggested that it may provide a logistics support package to assist in the mission.

Bad Decision After Next. Mali's interim government is fractured, and national reconciliation is far from being achieved. According to the U.N. Secretary General's report, "Internal divisions constitute the single greatest obstacle to progress."⁴ Less than two weeks ago, for example, Mali's interim Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra was arrested by troops loyal to Captain Sanogo and forced to resign.⁵

France, Mali's former colonial ruler, has been a strong supporter of taking swift military action in Mali before the political process had been settled. The U.S. had opposed such action, maintaining that military action could be pursued once democratic governance is restored. Similarly, the ECOWAS and AU report warned that the continued

absence of a united, civilian-led government and the interference of the military have "severely constrained" the creation "of a common strategic vision for the country," undermining the long-term viability of military progress.

The authorization of Resolution 2085 fails to sufficiently heed these concerns. Indeed, approval in the wake of Diarra's forced resignation could be construed as rewarding the Malian army for bad behavior. The UNSC's authorization of military force provides little incentive for the restoration of a civilian-led government. Rather, it lends the army the momentum to plan for military action and treat the reinstatement of democratic governance as secondary.

Considering that the UNSC has so far bypassed the institution of a united government despite the Security General's report urging military force as a "last resort," there is little reason to believe that one will be established under the new framework. By voting in favor of Resolution 2085, the Obama Administration has committed itself to supporting a military operation in which the restoration of Mali's governance is not guaranteed.

Moving Forward. The U.S. has significant leverage at its disposal. Currently, Malian troops lack the

most basic of resources, including ammunition with which to train, and their lack of professionalism and disregard for human rights is well-known. Without U.S. support, it is unlikely that sufficient resources will be forthcoming.

With that in mind, the Obama Administration should take the following steps to ensure that democratic governance is treated as a non-negotiable precondition to military force in northern Mali:

- Make U.S. support for Mali's military contingent on demonstrated commitments from the army not to interfere with the transitional government's reconciliation.
- Restrict contributions for ECOWAS efforts to those that do not include the Malian army. Any deployment would take months to orchestrate. The U.S. should provide assistance to the deployment of an African force only when a coherent and coordinated plan has been created.
- Make the complete restoration of bilateral aid to Mali contingent on free and fair presidential elections. Humanitarian assistance should be an exception owing to dire food shortages in the north.

1. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2071, October 12, 2012, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2071%282012%29 (accessed December 20, 2012).

2. United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali," November 29, 2012, p. 20, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Report%20of%20the%20Secretary-General%20on%20the%20situation%20in%20Mali.pdf> (accessed December 20, 2012).

3. Associated Press, "U.N. Approves Military Action to Oust Al-Qaida in Mali, but Not Before Political Progress," *The Washington Post*, December 20, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/un-authorizes-military-action-to-reunify-mali-but-demands-political-progress-first/2012/12/20/057ff3cc-4ae6-11e2-8758-b64a2997a921_story.html (accessed December 20, 2012).

4. United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali," p. 19.

5. Despite calls for him to relinquish power to a civilian-led interim government, Sanogo has refused to transfer power. Sanogo enjoys considerable support from the Malian population, who resented President Touré for his tendencies toward corruption, cronyism, and outright criminality. Katarina Hojje and Umoro Djau, "Mali's Prime Minister Abruptly Resigns After Arrest," CNN, December 11, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/11/world/africa/mali-unrest/index.html> (accessed December 20, 2012).

- Continue counterterrorism operations in the region, especially surveillance and intelligence gathering. This should include monitoring the movement of people, goods, and weapons. Limited U.S. support for the African-led mission should not preclude U.S. national security responsibilities.
- Offer Mali's interim government consultants, election observers, and other resources to assist in national reconciliation and the holding of credible elections.
- Encourage open dialogue with leading Tuareg separatists who disavow violence and seek peace and stability in the north. The Tuareg community has long been marginalized by the government in Bamako and could be a useful ally if certain conditions are met.
- Do not discourage the Malian interim government's negotiation with Islamist groups that renounce violence. This should be treated as an opportunity for dialogue. Last month, Burkinabe President Blaise Compaoré met with representatives from Ansar Dine, demonstrating a potential opening for a political resolution. If Ansar Dine and other Islamist entities express a genuine intent to negotiate, the line of communication should be kept open.

Ballots, Not Bullets. The U.S. should not let the urgency of a military intervention derail efforts to re-establish governance in Mali. A

Malian government led by an undisciplined military dismissive of democratic governance would draw the country closer to the brink of failed statehood. For a country that was once considered a promising model for democracy, the future of Mali's stability will depend on ballots, not bullets.

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