Paris Admits it is Unable to Stand up to Militants in Mali as it Withdraws Troops

Spearheaded by Paris and Canada, Europeans recognized the futility of their activities in Mali within the ill-fated anti-terrorist Operation Barkhane that lasted for 9 years since 2014, and on February 17 decided to begin a coordinated military withdrawal from this African country. French president Emmanuel Macron said that after pulling out of Mali European troops would be redeployed to neighboring Niger.

Pan-African activists, however, have been outspoken in their criticism of the news about the French troops redeployment from Mali to Niger. They argue that France had plenty of time to deal away with terrorist groups but it failed to accomplish this goal. For example, a pan-African activist Moussa Tchangari said: “This is Emmanuel Macron’s mistake. By keeping his troops in the Sahel, the Elysee Palace runs a risk of putting these countries in a tough spot. We have already criticized the French military presence since we think it is useless. Moreover, in the long term it threatens Niger’s sovereignty.”

France’s military withdrawal from Mali will take four to six months, President of the former colonial power Emmanuel Macron said. At the same time, Mali’s authorities demanded that France step up its military withdrawal. A statement to this effect was made by Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga, the government’s spokesperson. In particular, he stressed out the following: “Given constant violations of defense agreements the government suggested that the French authorities should without delay withdraw its task forces within Operations Barkhane and Takuba from the territories under the control of the Malian authorities.”

According to France 24, Emmanuel Macron’s announcement about the French pullout did not come as a surprise in the Malian capital Bamako. The media outlet also stressed that nine years of French intervention did not succeed in providing response to the security issues and now Malian citizens place faith in new partners such as Russia, China.
and Turkey. In general, the locals are in favor of rebuilding sovereign pan-African Mali against “dictate and interference from France." This is evidenced by the last several months that have been marked by anti-French demonstrations across this entire African country and its regional neighbors. The population denounced French foreign policy in the Western Africa and questioned the validity of Operation Barkhane, which after nine years of intervention has not succeeded in reaching the stated security goals.

According to the Elysee Palace, there are currently 25,000 European troops in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad), including 4,300 French service members. Besides, 2,400 French soldiers have been deployed in Mali. This country has also accommodated 15,000 troops as part of the UN Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). During the operation, 53 French soldiers have been killed in action. An average of $1.27 billion is spent annually to prop up MINUSMA, which makes it the most expensive UN peacekeeping mission.

However, neither high numbers, nor exorbitant expenses have been enough help for the peacekeepers to accomplish their primary task in Mali. The death toll increased exponentially: in 2016 the conflict claimed 71 lives while in 2019, 815 people were killed. Further down the line, this figure continued to grow. Human Rights Watch experts think that even those numbers are significantly downplayed compared to the facts on the ground.

Since their arrival to Mali, MINUSMA employees did not take any interest in fighting the militants. Instead of protecting civilians, those “peacekeepers,” according to the local media, promoted chaos in the country using it as a pretext to demand the extension of the UN mandate and additional funds. MINUSMA representatives’ criminal record is trivial: robberies, rape, murder, execution of civilians, smuggling, inaction, training, supplying and aiding the militants. Indeed, one of the victims said she was gang-raped, after which the “peacekeepers” burned her genitals with cigarettes. By 2021, the terrorist group Boko Haram (banned in Russia) not only increased its footprint but also turned the republic into Africa’s drug powerhouse.

Over the years these “peacekeepers” were stationed in Mali, they showed a poor performance while being unable to stop radical violence in the region.

France’s decision to pull back troops from Mali grabbed headlines in many countries. Nathalie Yamb, Cameroonian human rights activist, stressed that the decision to entirely withdraw French troops from Mali was made by local residents and the government, not by Paris. “When the Elysee Palace officials announced that they curtail the ineffective Operation Barkhane they understood that this was not their decision, but the decision of the African population. We are witnessing France’s complete defeat, their rout shall be credited with the local residents and the government,” she said.

According to a poll by Le Figaro, about 90% of persons reading this French newspaper approve of the Elysee Palace’s decision to withdraw troops from the Republic of Mali.

Alioune Tine, UN independent expert on human rights, said that the security situation in Mali improved after the nation’s authorities scaled back their cooperation with France. African figures and government officials in Bamako argue that the shutdown of foreign-backed anti-terrorist operations will not harm the republic. At the same time, prime minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga pointed out that after the Western soldiers had been deployed, the situation in the country went downhill: “International experts think that the withdrawal of Barkhane and Takuba forces results from the failure of Western military intervention which led to terrorism spilling onto 80% of the nation’s territory as opposed to fighting it. France established an enclave in Mali. It formed and trained a radical group in Kidal. In 2013, during military push against the armed gangs in the northern regions Paris blocked Mali’s military from returning to Kidal because it had established there a training facility.”

According to RFI Kiswahili news agency, prime minister Maïga also accused France of its plans to splinter the West African nation through military intervention in the Sahel. “After a time of “elation” when French soldiers liberated northern Mali from jihadists in 2013, the intervention turned into an operation of de facto partition of Mali,” he said.

Against the backdrop of the termination of Mali’s security cooperation with France, Information and Public Relations Department of the Malian Armed forces (DIRPA) held its fifth press conference on the security situation. Souleymane Dembélé, DIPRA’s director, spoke about the growing might of the Malian Armed Forces (FAM) touting the results of its anti-terrorist operations. From December 25 to February 17 alone, FAM soldiers eliminated 208 bandits, detained 108 criminals, and confiscated 47 weapons.

African journalists noted that the Armed forces of Mali grew stronger due to rapprochement between Moscow and Bamako. Moreover, according to their reports, even militants fled the town of Bankass in panic when they heard of
Russian instructors being deployed nearby. The retreat of foreign military contingents from Mali will have a positive effect on the national army’s combat capabilities, reports Mali Actu.

_Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._