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By Gregor Link
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German defence minister visits Niger and Mali in preparation for massive combat operation in the Sahel

The German government is preparing to expand its Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) mission in Mali and Niger into a massive combat operation and to extend it indefinitely. This was made clear by Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) during her first visit to the region last week.

“We must be prepared to stay here longer,” Kramp-Karrenbauer told the troops in Gao, northern Mali. The “changed security situation” required that the “self-protection” of the Bundeswehr troops be “appropriately taken into account” in the future “continuation of mandates.”

The minister’s programme included a demonstration of Germany’s Heron drone, the arming of which has been under consideration in government circles for months.

Germany needed “structures” in Mali to “stabilise” the government of the impoverished and war-torn country. For this, it was “necessary” to continue the deployment of the German military for as long as it took to “really train the local forces.” In addition, the various economic and military missions—above all France’s brutal combat mission “Barkhane”—are to be more closely interlinked with the mandates of the Bundeswehr in future.

The defence minister also intends to further strengthen the alliance with the regime in Niger, which has been armed to the highest standards by Germany. According to a report

by *Die Welt*, Kramp-Karrenbauer is concerned with “developing bilateral relations,, “training” Nigerian forces and supplying further “military equipment.”

The Nigerien government is closely allied with Germany and has been taking extremely tough action against migrants for years. Even today, the “poorest country in the world”—measured by the UN Development Index—spends an unprecedented 18 percent of its national budget every year on investments in increasing state powers.

The Bundeswehr military base in Niamey, the capital of Niger, serves German troops as an indispensable logistics centre for deployments in Mali and other countries. The French army also maintains a command post in the city from which it controls its drone strikes against alleged “terrorists” in Mali. Here, the minister visited elite soldiers of the Special Forces Command of the Navy (KSM), who for months have been training special units of the Nigerien army in an unmandated mission.

The day before their appearance in Gao, Kramp-Karrenbauer had visited the EU programme EUTM in Koulikoro in central Mali. The “showcase for cooperation with European forces,” as the minister calls the military mission, trains proxy troops of the Malian government and in February became the target of a large-scale vehicle bomb attack. Only a week ago, at least 38 government soldiers, 15 rebels and 2 civilians died in an attack on two Malian army camps in the region.

Between November 2018 and March 2019 alone, 547 civilians lost their lives in Mali, and as of May 2019, nearly 200 UN soldiers had been killed. The war, which has lasted for more than six years, has cost the lives of at least 6,000 people and triggered a refugee crisis in the course of which tens of thousands have been displaced from their homelands.

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At the same time, the neo-colonial campaigns of France and Germany in the country create the conditions for an escalating wave of ethnic violence. Hardly a month has passed without a massacre between the population groups. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper, which supports the military operation, reports that the regime in Bamako, supported by Germany and France, is cooperating with militias that “terrorise the population in order to assert their influence in contested regions.”

The UN report on Mali published last Monday also states that the government troops trained by the West are committing bloody crimes. “Security forces and national defence forces” were responsible for the “extrajudicial killing of four Mondoro district men” and

for at least one case of “torture that led to the death of the victim detained in Gao,” it said. In at least three cases, the “state authorities did not investigate or prosecute.”

Given the sharp tensions between the regime and large sections of the population, it can be assumed that the real extent of state violence is even greater. Only at the beginning of the year, the government had to resign as a result of mass protests and strikes in the capital.

In Mali, the Bundeswehr in turn supports the hated Bamako regime and is itself becoming more and more involved militarily. As the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reports, the soldiers of the occupying powers will in future appear side by side with the troops of the Malian government. Already, the Bundeswehr is combing its huge operational area “day and night” with patrols from “eleven armoured vehicles” equipped “with machine guns and grenade launchers.”

Germany and France are pursuing imperialist interests in Mali. The West African country is geo-strategically important and rich in raw materials. It contains at least three large deposits of uranium—in Falea, 200 miles west of Bamako, and in the city of Samit in the north of the country. Mali is now the third largest gold producer on the African continent after Ghana and South Africa. Industry analysts of the South African Public Investment Corp. (PIC) expect another “gold rush in West Africa” due to “low investment costs in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and the Ivory Coast.”

With its neo-colonial occupation of Mali and the comprehensive militarisation of the entire Sahel region, the German government can rely on the support of the media and all parties in the Bundestag (parliament)—including the Left Party and the Greens.

Kramp-Karrenbauer was accompanied by a delegation that included various journalists from the major newspapers and several members of the Bundestag. Criticism from this entourage came exclusively from the right. Business daily *Handelsblatt*, for example, complained of an alleged “sluggish provision” of supplies to the Bundeswehr in Mali. According to the newspaper, Tobias Lindner, security spokesman for the Greens, “explained” to the defence minister that the federal government “had to change the framework agreements.”

Tobias Pflüger, defence spokesman for the Left Party, who cynically calls himself a “peace researcher” although he regularly visits German troops in areas of deployment, criticised Kramp-Karrenbauer for not having coordinated the trip closely enough with the soldiers on the ground. “The minister, or at least her team, must have known that the trip

was being planned at the same time as a troop rotation,” he told newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, “Anyone who overlooks or ignores something like this is rightly drawing the troops’ ire.”

Pflüger and the Left Party are particularly disturbed by the fact that the military operation in Niger has so far been conducted without an official mandate. “We criticise the fact that the Gazelle mission in Niger, although it involves ‘fighting with weapons,’ is being conducted without a mandate from the German Bundestag,” Pflüger writes on his homepage. “I call on the German government to put an end to this lack of a mandate and, if soldiers are already in Niger, to present a mandate for the Gazelle military mission.”

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