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Germany and EU expand military deployment in Africa

The coronavirus pandemic is acting as a catalyst in the scramble by the great powers to redivide Africa. German imperialism sees the crisis as an opportunity to assert its global geopolitical interests by force of arms. In the last few days, the Bundestag (parliament) decided to extend or prolong two military operations. Besides Libya, Mali and Somalia, German forces may operate in Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger in the future.

Sahel region

On Friday, by a large majority, the Bundestag gave the starting signal for a massive escalation of the German military deployment in the Sahel region of west Africa. The stationing of 1,100 Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) soldiers in Mali under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN) MINUSMA mission was extended. At the same time, the training of African troops has been expanded.

The Bundestag resolution provides for the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) programme, which has been running for seven years, to be extended until May 2024 and extended to the entire Sahel region. This means that in the future, European soldiers will also train the armed forces of the pro-Western regimes in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. The European Council had already created a corresponding mandate a week ago.

In Mali, the EUTM “training mission” has so far built up an army of 20,000 troops. However, in a recent editorial, Lorenz Hemicker, political editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, considers the results achieved so far to be insufficient. He complains

that the Malian armed forces are not yet capable of “fighting insurgency on their own,” although the Bundeswehr informs the government troops “about the best tactics in local and house fighting.”

For this reason, the new mandate provides for the mission to be strengthened by Germany with 100 additional soldiers. The troops of the Bamako regime, which is hated by the population, will thus be able to go into action in the future accompanied by up to 450 German “trainers.” In this way, the Bundeswehr is provoking violent clashes between German soldiers and local oppositional militias, which in turn could provide the pretext for the deployment of armed combat drones in the region. A currently unarmed Heron combat drone has been in service with the Bundeswehr in Mali since 2016.

In addition, the EUTM mission is being transferred from Koulikoro in southern Mali directly to the war zone in the interior of the country. The new base will be in Sévaré near Mopti, where the heaviest battles between government troops and militias are raging. Only a few kilometres away, unknown persons murdered the inhabitants of the village of Ogossagou last March, including many women and children.

As eyewitnesses told broadcaster Deutschlandfunk radio at the time, the murderers included heavily armed men in uniforms of the Malian army. They were equipped “with bulletproof vests and modern weapons, as the Malian army has them,” a witness reported. The Malian government troops, according to their own statements, had “withdrawn” from the village a few hours earlier and did not return to the scene of the massacre until hours later—although the villagers had sent desperate distress calls to the authorities.

For years, the Malian regime has been demonstrably committing atrocities against the civilian population. A report to the UN Security Council spoke of at least three “attacks on civilians” in 2018, including a “suspected mass execution with 44 dead” and an attack on a cattle market in which “12 civilians were killed.” UN investigators also discovered several mass graves. In 2019, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which also supports military action, wrote that the regime-supported “militias...terrorise the population in order to impose its influence in disputed regions.”

This policy is now being extended to Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad in the interest of German and European imperialism. A strategy paper of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (*Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*) states that “the regional security forces” are indeed “part of the problem”—but “without them, it is not possible.”

Since “overcoming the corona crisis will temporarily push everything else into the background,” the German government should work towards “including countries like Burkina Faso and Niger and better linking all missions [in the Sahel]. The focus *initially* should be on civil and medical projects, rather than military capabilities [emphasis added].”

In other words, under the pretext of the fight against COVID-19, Bundeswehr troops and the murderous “regional security forces” trained by Europe should “link up” their combat strength with the UN mission MINUSMA and the French military mission code-named Barkhane.

MINUSMA comprises up to 15,200 foreign soldiers and police officers who were stationed in Mali “following Opération Serval” in order to “stabilise” conditions. Barkhane, the successor mission to Serval, in turn officially includes 3,000 French soldiers for “counterinsurgency” measures and the killing of “Islamists,” as well as special forces and mercenaries of the Foreign Legion.

In addition to access to gold, uranium, and labour, involvement in the region, from the German point of view, is particularly concerned with combating so-called “illegal migration”—i.e., using armed force to fight desperate refugees.

People fleeing from ethnic violence and colonial oppression and seeking a way through the Sahara meet watering points that are blocked by the Nigerian military. The result is a gigantic death strip right across the African continent. The International Organisation for Migration estimates that the number of people who die in the desert is at least twice as high as the number of dead migrants in the Mediterranean. The organisation estimates that more than 30,000 people “disappeared” in the Sahara between 2014 and 2018.

In Niger, which has been armed to the teeth by Germany in particular, the Bundeswehr also maintains a military base that, according to media reports, acts as a “hub” for all German military operations in the Sahel region. Chancellor Merkel had thanked Nigerian President Issoufou Mahamadou in 2018 for the “highly successful cooperation” in the “fight against illegal migration.”

Germany is directly involved in this bloody “fight.” For at least half a year now, elite German navy troops (KSM) have been on combat duty in the country and training special units of the Nigerian military. The secret mission had previously taken place without a Bundestag mandate, but with the extension of EUTM, a mandate has now been created for the so-called Operation Gazelle.

Those who do not die of thirst in the Sahara are threatened with enslavement. In Mauritania, whose troops will in future also be trained by European soldiers, slavery was legal until 2007, though the economic structures of it still exist. According to estimates by local anti-slavery organisation SOS Esclaves, there were still 600,000 slaves in Mauritania in 2010.

Horn of Africa

On Wednesday, the Bundestag extended the European “Atalanta” mission off the coast of Somalia by another year, by an overwhelming majority of 536 parliamentary deputies. This means that up to 400 German soldiers will continue to participate in the European Union’s so-called anti-piracy mission, which has been ongoing since 2008. The German and European naval forces are defending imperialist interests in a region that has suffered unprecedented social devastation due to Western overfishing, unilateral trade agreements and decades of civil war.

“Through its presence in the sea area off the Horn of Africa, the EU...protects European interests and contributes to the stabilisation of the region,” reads the German government’s mission statement. Among other things, the mission plans to use armed force to shield UN food supplies from unauthorised access and to fight local “pirates” with naval forces.

The military mission has not failed to have its effect over the past 12 years. According to a report by weekly *Die Zeit*, which welcomes the mission, the number of attacks on transnational trawlers has “decreased enormously” in recent years. Illegal fishing by foreign fleets, on the other hand, has continued to increase in the slipstream of European warships, according to UN sources.

Somalia and other countries in East Africa are currently suffering the worst floods in 40 years. The massive rains have caused dams to burst, which in turn have destroyed infrastructure and homes, forcing people to stay in home-made huts. Nearly 1 million people have been affected, and 400,000 have lost their homes.

The flood disaster is also hampering the humanitarian work of the UN, including the fight against COVID-19, and has created the conditions for the second plague of locusts since the beginning of this year. Twenty million Somalis are at risk of starvation, and almost 3 million are refugees. The country’s infrastructure has been largely destroyed after three decades of armed conflict.

As for COVID-19, the country is threatened by the epidemic. The US Johns Hopkins University lists the country in second last place in its Global Health Security Index (GHS Index), which represents the state of preparedness to deal with epidemics in 195 countries. The university currently measures the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Somalia at 1,731. The number of cases has been rising rapidly since the beginning of April, and the number of unreported cases is likely to be high; the 67 officially registered fatalities include the Minister of Justice of the state of Hirshabelle.

Although the imperialist powers have created the conditions for this maelstrom of displacement, natural disasters and pandemic in the last decades, they are now using the devastating situation as a pretext to prepare a geopolitical redivision of the region using military force. The Atalanta mission also fulfils a “deterrent function” in this respect, *Die Zeit* notes.

“Germany and Europe face several challenges in dealing with COVID-19 in the Horn of Africa, but there are also opportunities,” notes a current strategy paper published by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Germany has proven to be a “reliable partner” for the East African regimes and should now “lead the way” in taking on the role of “coordinator” within the EU.

In this context, the paper suggests “hosting a Sudan conference,” as the country on the Red Sea is of “enormous strategic importance” for the entire region. At the beginning of May, the Bundestag sent almost 300 Bundeswehr soldiers to Libya, where such a conference was held in January chaired by Germany.

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