

Russian Military Instructors in Africa. St Petersburg Russia-Africa Summit

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On the eve of the second Russia-Africa summit scheduled for July 27-28 in St. Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin explained in article published on his Kremlin website that Moscow would continue supporting strategic ways for establishing sustainable peace and political stability in conflict-ridden African countries. In fact the expected large-scale summit is held under the slogan "For Peace, Security and Development" – a repeat from October 2019.

Oleg Ozerov, Ambassador-at-Large at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Head of the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum, spoke in an interview with RIA Novosti and also explicitly pointed to the fact Russia has no military bases not military troops in Africa.

"We don't have a military presence there. There are appeals to the Russian side for help in ensuring security. This is not a military presence. Military presence is when troops are sent. We send instructors at the request of the African states themselves. But all this is not a military presence," Ozerov said.

With regard to the fight against terrorism, it is also necessary to formulate more precisely. We are talking not only about the fight against terrorism in Africa, but in general about the joint fight against terror, because it has a cross-border character, which is a serious problem for the African continent: in Somalia, the Sahara-Sahel region, where terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda," the diplomat added in his interview.

CEO of the Russian arms export agency Rosoboronexport Alexander Mikheev, during pre-summit discussions, indicated that his agency has signed over 150 military contracts with African countries, its order booked stands more than \$10 billion since 2019.

For Rosoboron export, the July summit is a unique event enabling to find new growth points in military cooperation with partners, find reliable customers and start developing new

market segments, especially those conflict-ridden and war-torn African countries. According to him, Moscow is ready to assist with uninterrupted supplies to fight increasing terrorism, crime, and all kinds of threats in the continent.

For fear and concerns about the new rise of terrorism, the Sahel-5 countries are turning to Russia. After the political power changed hands in Mali, a former French colony with a fractured economy and a breeding field for armed Islamic jihadist groups, Russia offered tremendous assistance.

By showing support for the military government in Mali, Russia has utterly ignored or violated the protocols for implementing the “Silencing the Guns” agenda in West Africa, a flagship programme of the African Union’s Agenda 2063. Now Russia is capitalizing on this loophole opportunity, eyeing Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali as possible conduits, to penetrate into the entire Sahel and West Africa.

There are frequent narratives that some these African leaders have signed non-transparent agreements, routinely ignored both the executive and legislative decisions on tendering national projects and natural resources. The barter agreement involves exchanged of mineral deposits for military weapons and equipment from Russia.

In the case of in Central African Republic (CAR), Russia donated weapons to CAR’s weak military and initially provided 175 military instructors. Since then, the number of Russian instructors has grown to 1,200. The situation in CAR is very precarious, a lot of fighters are not military instructors. In Mali and CAR, instructors are allowed into civilian zones.

Malian interim military leader Col. Assimi Goita and his government have halted relations with France, moved closer to Russia. Mali is a shady remote country and Moscow is highly interested in exploring natural resources, has mining concession agreements in exchange with military weapons and equipment. The military is keen on fighting what it termed “active terrorist groups” in the country. On the other hand, Moscow aggressively moving its military-technical cooperation shows the desire to ensure the country’s defense capabilities, especially in the face of the persisting terrorist threat in the region.

According to several reports especially from Associated Press, AFP, Reuters and DW as well as BBC, Mali’s authorities have an agreement with the Russian private military company Wagner Group that replaced the French military. Reuters further reported that the contract could be worth \$10.8 million a month. Mali has taken delivery of military equipment and hundreds of military experts and instructors are operating in the country. These military instructors move around the country including civilian quarters.

As has been in the past, under the new military leadership harrowing accounts of human rights abuses have emerged. In addition to the previous abuses, the late March massacre of about 300 people in the village Malian village of Moura became very questionable, called for international condemnation. Most importantly, it must be thorough systematic investigations to ascertain the primary causes, the implications and possibly to take punitive actions.

For the African Union and ECOWAS, the scale and gravity of Mali’s military leadership violating human rights, of course, is a strong signal to hold them for responsible for this crimes which many have described reports and images of civilian killings as disturbing.

Joseph Siegle, Director of Research and Daniel Eizenga, Research Fellow at the Africa Center

for Strategic Studies, co-authored an article headlined “Russia’s Wagner Play Undermines the Transition in Mali” in which they highlighted Wagner’s potential entry into Mali, and it reminds how the group started operating, and later grossly involved in human rights abuses in the Central African Republic.

The two researchers have several times suggested to the Security Council of the African Union and ECOWAS to invoke the African Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism, which went into effect in 1985, prohibiting states from allowing mercenaries into their territories. Declaring Wagner a mercenary force identifies them, appropriately, as an illegal entity, one that should be categorically prohibited from operating in Mali (and other parts of Africa).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that Malian forces and foreign fighters killed 300 civilians in Moura, late March. The report described as “the worst single atrocity reported in Mali’s decade-long armed conflict.” Several witnesses and other sources identified the foreign soldiers as Russians to HRW.

According to the report, the massacre took place over four days, with the vast majority of the victims being ethnic Fulanis group. Moura is small provincial town, which has a population of around 10,000, has been the epicenter of conflict-related violence. “The soldiers patrolled through town, executing several men as they tried to flee, and detaining hundreds of unarmed men from the market and their homes. The incident is the worst single atrocity reported in Mali’s decade-long armed conflict,” the HRW report said.

“Abuses by armed Islamist groups is no justification at all for the military’s deliberate slaughter of people in custody. The Malian government is responsible for this atrocity – the worst in Mali in a decade – whether carried out by Malian forces or associated foreign soldiers,” the report said.

Russia has assigned, what officially described as military instructors to Mali. There are no doubts that neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger are also looking for such deals with Moscow. The United States, France and European Union say the instructors are operatives from the Russian private security firm Wagner.

Russia has blocked a request put forward by France at the UN Security Council for “independent investigations” into the alleged massacre of several hundred civilians in Mali by the Malian army and Russian paramilitaries, diplomatic sources said. That was followed widely shared social media reports of a civilian massacre in the country.

That however, Moscow congratulated Mali on an “important victory” against “terrorism” and it described as “disinformation” allegations about the massacre, as well as claims about the involvement of Russian mercenaries. The statement posted to the official website noted that “such a large-scale liquidation of terrorists became possible as a result of carefully conducted reconnaissance and coordinated actions of the units of the Malian army.”

According to media reports, the arrival of Russian mercenaries in the Sahel – of which thousands are expected – would jeopardize other external commitments to fighting terrorism, and limit development assistance from international organizations. For example, Reuters has reported that a possible contract could be worth \$10.8 million, or estimated more per month, depending on the contract, working with the Russian private military company Wagner Group.

Down the years, Kremlin has been saying the Russian government has no ties to the business of Wagner Group. Then at the same time, the Russian authorities have fiercely defended Wagner Group's military business in countries facing conflicts that it has the legitimate right to work and pursue its business interests anywhere in the world as long as it did not break Russian law.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has often spoken against such collaboration, the use of Russian mercenaries in Africa. The best is to consider bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to work towards operationalizing and implementing the United Nations Security Council resolutions on the Sahel, and primarily aim at attaining regional peace, and further to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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