

Russia's Lavrov Vows Aid for W.Africa's Jihadist Fight

By [AFP](#)

February 07, 2023



Russian Foreign Ministry / Facebook

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday pledged assistance to West African states battling jihadists, as Moscow seeks to expand its influence on a continent in a diplomatic tug-of-war between global powers.

Lavrov hailed the alliance that has been forged between Moscow and Bamako in fighting extremists on his first visit to Mali, which Russia's top diplomat described as "historic."

"The fight against terrorism is, of course, an issue for the other countries in the region," Lavrov told a press conference in the capital Bamako.

"We are going to provide our assistance to them to overcome these difficulties. This concerns Guinea, Burkina Faso and Chad and the Sahel region generally and even the coastal states on the Gulf of Guinea," he said.

Mali had long relied on former colonial power France for military assistance in fighting the insurgency. But Paris pulled troops out of the West African nation last year as tensions with the ruling junta reached a breaking point.

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Since seizing power in 2020, Mali's ruling junta has brought in Russian planes, helicopters and paramilitaries to strengthen its fight against jihadist militants.

France says the Russian operatives are Wagner mercenaries -- a private military group that Moscow has deployed in Syria and now Ukraine, experts say.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the UN have implicated Wagner and the Malian army in an alleged massacre at Moura in central Mali last March in which several hundred people were rounded up and killed.

The landlocked state is the epicenter of a jihadist insurgency that began in northern Mali in 2012 and spread to neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso in 2015.

Thousands of civilians have died across the three countries, and millions have fled their homes.

Discontent within the military in Mali and Burkina has spurred two coups in both countries.

Sporadic cross-border attacks have also taken place in Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast in recent years, spurring fears that the jihadists are seeking to push southwards to the Gulf of Guinea.

'Neo-colonial' West

After France wound down its long-running military presence in Mali, similar tensions have broken out with the Burkina Faso junta.

The French military contingent there, a unit of special forces numbering around 400 men, is to be withdrawn this month.

Lavrov promised Mali further military support and declared Russia's wider backing for Africa in the face of what he described as the West's "neo-colonial approach."

"We are going to provide our support for resolving problems on the African continent," he said.

"We always start from the basis that African problems must be resolved by African solutions."

While Moscow woos African leaders — some of whom have refused to publicly condemn the war in Ukraine — the United States has launched its own diplomatic offensive on the continent, which is also being courted by China.

Russia summit

Before leaving Mali, Lavrov also met with junta leader Colonel Assimi Goita, who is due to attend a Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg in July.

At a joint press conference with his Malian counterpart Abdoulaye Diop, Lavrov told journalists that thanks to Russian support, "Mali has been able to carry out effective operations" against the jihadists.

Diop also hailed Moscow's provision of cereals, fertilizer, and fuel to the poor, landlocked nation.

"Mali stands in solidarity with Russia on the issue of sanctions" it faces due to its invasion of Ukraine, he said.

The two men defended their alliance and dismissed accusations of human rights violations by foreign fighters in the country.

"We are not going to continue to justify our choice of partners... Russia is here at Mali's request, and Russia responds effectively to Mali's needs" by strengthening its defense capabilities," said Diop.

Less than 48 hours before Lavrov's visit, the junta announced the expulsion of the UN's human rights envoy to the country.

"Human rights are being instrumentalized, politicized for hidden agendas," said Diop.

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