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Washington Says Russian Soldiers Deployed at Niger Airbase Housing U.S. Military

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Demonstrators rallying against the U.S. military in Niger's capital of Niamey. **AFP**

Russian military instructors are operating at the same airbase in Niger as American troops, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday, confirming previous media reports that Russian troops had entered the same base amid the West African nation's deepening ties with Moscow.

"The Russians are in a separate compound and don't have access to U.S. forces or access to our equipment," Austin said, seeking to temper concerns about threats the Russian troops might pose to U.S. servicemen and military hardware.

"I'm always focused on the safety and protection of our troops," Austin told a press conference in Hawaii. "But right now, I don't see a significant issue here in terms of our force protection."

Russian military instructors arrived in Niger with an air defense system and other equipment earlier in April, days after the West African country's leader spoke with President Vladimir Putin. Niger's military junta had in January agreed to step up military cooperation with Russia after expelling French forces.

Related article: Russia Sends Instructors, Air Defense System to Niger

Niger's military junta, which seized power last July, announced in March that it was ending a military cooperation agreement with Washington, which last month agreed to remove its troops and sent a delegation to work out an orderly departure.

U.S. Africa commander General Michael Langley said this week that talks were still ongoing and a decision on the withdrawal of 1,000 American military personnel would be announced in the coming weeks.

Niger, which houses an American drone base, is a linchpin in the U.S. and French strategy to combat jihadists in West Africa.

Citing anonymous U.S. defense officials, Reuters and CNN reported earlier that Russian and U.S. troops were operating in separate hangars at the same Niger base, dubbed Airbase 101, which is near the international airport in the Nigerien capital of Niamey.

The Nigerien and Russian embassies in Washington had not yet responded to requests for comment.

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