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Russia Hosts First Military Meeting With Sahel Juntas

By AFP

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Defense Minister Andrei Belousov (center) meets with the heads of militaries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. **Russian Defense Ministry**

Russia hosted its first official meeting with the heads of militaries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, Moscow's Defense Ministry said Thursday, as it seeks to increase its influence in the Sahel region.

Facing isolation in the West following its full-scale war in Ukraine, Moscow has tried to build new partnerships in Africa, where it has been growing its presence in recent years, including militarily.

The three Sahelian countries are led by juntas which seized power in coups and have turned away from former colonial power France while moving closer to Russia, which sends mercenaries to help them fight a jihadist insurgency.

"Today we are holding the first consultations between the heads of the defense ministries of the Russian Federation and the countries participating in the Sahel states confederation," Defense Minister Andrei Belousov said, referring to the recently created entity aimed to replace a Western-led alliance.

"Currently, defense is the largest area of cooperation between our countries," said his Malian counterpart Sadio Camara, a heavyweight in the junta who is seen as one of the advocates of closer ties with Russia.

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Niger and Burkina Faso defense ministers Salifou Modi and Celestin Simpore also took part in the meeting, according to the footage shared by the Russian ministry.

Following the talks, Russia and the three states signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation, Moscow's Defense Ministry said, without giving details.

Belousov said Russia was ready to provide a "comprehensive assistance" to ensure stability in the contested region facing a growing jihadist conflict, which threatens to spill over to the wider west Africa region.

The three states quit the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the beginning of the year, accusing the regional bloc of being subservient to France, and have formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), aimed to offset the pro-Western ECOWAS.

The Russian minister called the decision to create the pro-Russian bloc AES a "result of a free choice by the Sahelian peoples their commitment to sustainable peaceful development."

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