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Russia's Africa Corps Deploys New Drone in Mali as Strikes Increase, Analysis Says

By Reuters

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An Africa Corps fighter approaches a helicopter. **Africa Corps / VK**

Russia's Africa Corps troops operating in Mali deployed a new type of suicide drone this year as they ramped up air strikes seeking to regain momentum lost in April when Islamist and separatist insurgents went on the offensive, according to new analysis shared with Reuters.

The analysis, produced by Conflict Insights Group, a U.S.-based public-interest research organization, found that the state-backed paramilitary force was increasingly using a new one-way attack drone known as the ZALA Lancet in Mali, where the tempo of overall air and drone strikes more than doubled and recorded deaths from those strikes were up nearly 150% since April.

Africa Corps, a unit operating under Russia's Defense Ministry, has around 2,500 men fighting alongside Mali's military government against a range of separatist rebels and militants aligned to al Qaeda and Islamic State.

The separatists and al Qaeda-linked insurgents, who have a tactical alliance, launched a coordinated offensive across the country in April, seizing several towns and killing Mali's defense minister at his home near the capital.

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Russian and Malian forces have since retaken some of the seized territory, but CIG said the spike in civilian deaths resulting from Africa Corps strikes would likely fuel insurgent recruitment over the longer term.

"The increase in civilian casualties as a result of drone strikes attributable to Africa Corps is set to bolster Islamist recruiting and unintentionally strengthen Mali's insurgents," it said.

The Russian and Malian governments did not respond to requests for comment.

Russians change tactics after losses earlier this year

Backed for years by UN peacekeepers and French troops, Mali turned to Russia for support after soldiers seized power in coups in 2020 and 2021.

The Wagner Group mercenary force deployed at first, but Africa Corps, which is more closely aligned to the Defense Ministry, took over by last year.

Despite the sustained foreign support, the Tuareg-led separatist Azawad Liberation Front and the al Qaeda-aligned Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin hold swathes of territory and launched their simultaneous attacks in April.

"After this setback, the Africa Corps changed its tactics, increasing its use of one-way attack ‘suicide’ drones alongside a sharply higher tempo of air and drone strikes," CIG said.

CIG said Russian forces had deployed a range of drones. According to other conflict monitors, the Iranian-designed Shahed and its Russian-made versions, the Garpiya-A1 and Geran-2, have been used on multiple occasions in Mali.

However, the most significant addition came from ZALA Aero, which makes the Lancet drone and a surveillance drone that operates alongside it, CIG said. It said it had identified at least 10 Africa Corps drone strikes since April in which the pair were used in tandem.

On at least one occasion, CIG found that a Lancet had almost certainly targeted a vehicle carrying civilians, the analysis said.

Citing data from ACLED, a conflict monitor, CIG said that overall recorded air strikes in Mali rose to an average of nearly 16 a week after April, up from just fewer than seven a week in the preceding 52 weeks. The number of deaths resulting from these strikes rose to more than 60 a week from just fewer than 25 a week, CIG said.

"Russia's Africa Corps has turned Mali into a sales pitch for suicide drones — civilians are dying in the demonstration," said Justin Lynch, managing director of CIG.

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