

French-led forces retake key towns

US extends support to fight against Islamists

AGENCIES

French and Malian troops were restoring government control over the fabled Saharan trading town of Timbuktu yesterday, the latest gain in a fast-moving French-led offensive against al-Qaeda-allied fighters occupying northern Mali. On Saturday, the French-Malian offensive recaptured Gao, which along with Timbuktu was one of three major northern towns occupied last year by Tuareg and Islamist rebels who included fighters from al Qaeda's North Africa wing AQIM.

The Islamist militant rebels have pulled back northwards to avoid relentless French air strikes that have destroyed their bases, vehicles and weapons, allowing French and Malian troops to advance rapidly with air support and armoured vehicles.

The advancing troops were working on securing the town, a UNESCO World

Heritage site and labyrinth of ancient mosques and monuments and mud-brick homes, ready to flush out any Islamist fighters who might still be hiding among the population.

The third town, Kidal, remains in rebel hands.

In April last year after a coup in Bamako, an alliance of Tuareg rebels seeking an independent homeland in the north joined forces with several Islamist groups, seizing Kidal first and then the northern towns of Gao and Timbuktu.

The Islamists quickly sidelined the Tuaregs, imposing a harsh version of Islamic sharia law in the region. Transgressors were flogged, stoned and executed, they banned music and television and forced women to wear veils.

France launched a military offensive on January 11 after Islamists captured a central town and pushed deeper into government territory towards the capital Bamako.

MALI CRISIS

Jihadists return after Arab Spring

AFP, Tunis

The flow of foreign fighters into Syria, flood of arms across North Africa, war in Mali and terror attacks highlight the jihadists' return in a region rocked by the Arab Spring, diplomats and analysts say.

The combination of factors, following the absence of al-Qaeda and affiliates from the Arab Spring revolts, has led to France's military intervention against Islamists in Mali and the deadly hostage-taking at a desert gas plant in Algeria.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, appearing before Congress on Wednesday over September's attack on the American consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi, warned of the new geopolitical landscape in the Arab world and North Africa.

"We cannot afford to retreat now. When America is absent, especially from unstable environments, there are consequences. Extremism takes root, our interests suffer, and our security at home is threatened," she said.

Russia went further, charging the Western military intervention in Libya was the root cause of the insecurity.

"Acts of terrorism have become almost daily events, the proliferation of arms is out of control, (foreign)

fighters are infiltrating," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said this week.

"The impression is that Mali was a consequence of Libya and the hostage-taking in Algeria is a very worryingsignal," he said.

Despite their support for rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Western powers have also



started to voice growing concern over the influx of hundreds if not thousands of foreign jihadists onto the battlefields of Syria.

Jean-Pierre Filiu, a professor at the Sciences-Po institute in Paris, said al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb existed before the Arab Spring as a "gangster-jihadist" organisation.

It combined Muslim "holy war" with criminal activities and was severely repressed by dictators in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt that were swept away in a wave of popular uprisings.

But now, the new regimes have been struggling to come up with an alternative policy.

The hostage-taking at In Amenas gas plant highlighted the multinational dimension of the threat: the 32 assailants were of seven different nationalities entering from northern Mali, with reported logistical support from inside Libya.

Tripoli, Algiers and Tunis have pledged to coordinate their efforts to combat trafficking and terrorism, as the jihadists in North Africa adapt to the post-revolutionary realities of the region.

Mathieu Guidere, a French university scholar of Islam, said the rise of Islamic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt has forced jihadists to seek out new targets for their militancy to the secular, Muslim-majority south.

Guidere warned that France's intervention in Mali was a "strategic error" that could turn the country into another post-Saddam Hussein Iraq where al-Qaeda flourished in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion.



I am very fond of army: Suu Kyi

AGENCIES

Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday said she is still "fond" of her country's army, even though it kept her under house arrest for 15 years.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs, she told presenter Kirsty Young her Buddhist faith had helped her defy Burma's dictatorship, and later face them when taking a seat in parliament.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner's father, Aung San, is considered the father of modern Myanmar, and founded its army.

During the programme, which was recorded at her home in December, Suu Kyi admitted: "It's genuine, I'm fond of the army."

"People don't like me for saying that. There are many who have criticised me for being what they call a poster girl for the army - very flattering to be seen as a poster girl for anything at this time of life - but I think the truth is I am very fond of the army, because I always thought of it as my father's army."

Suu Kyi said she was happy to admit that she wants to become Myanmar's president, and dismissed politicians who pretend they are not hungry for power.

"I would like to be president," she said.

The democracy icon has also voiced confidence that the country's powerful military will support changes to the constitution that would allow her to become president.

NEWS IN brief

Indo-Pak trade likely to resume

IANS, Jammu

After days of high tensions along the Kashmir border, trade relations between the rivals would likely be resumed today, said an official source yesterday.

This dramatic turn around came after the Indian and Pakistani armies exchanged sweets along the LoC on Saturday as a mark of goodwill gesture on the occasion of India's 64th Republic Day.

The cross-LoC trade and travel, which was described as one of the biggest confidence building measures, was suspended after the January 8 brutal killing of two Indian soldiers by the Pakistani troops. Pakistan accused Indian troops of killing two Pakistani soldiers on two separate

Rally in US capital for gun control

AFP, Washington

Thousands of people marched in Washington carrying white placards marked with the names and pictures of gun crime victims on Saturday to demand stronger gun control legislation.

Around 270 million guns are in circulation in the United States -- almost one weapon for every man, woman and child -- where more than 32,000

Venezuela prison riot toll hits 61

AFP, Barquisimeto

Riot police squads yesterday worked to establish full control over a prison in northwestern Venezuela, where a riot has left at least 61 inmates dead and twice as many wounded.

Security forces were currently working "to remove inmates from the heart of the jail," she said, adding that the rioters and other inmates would be moved to other prisons around the country.

'Chavez has beaten infection'

AFP, Santiago

President Hugo Chavez has beaten a severe respiratory infection that occurred after his latest cancer surgery in Cuba, Venezuelan Communications Minister Ernesto Villegas said Saturday in Santiago.

"The respiratory infection has been overcome, though there still is some degree of breathing difficulty that is being treated appropriately," he said on the sidelines of a regional summit with European Union leaders in the Chilean capital.

Major floods hammer Queensland

AFP, Sydney

Two people were missing and the body of a third person was recovered from raging floodwaters as severe storms pounded northeastern Australia yesterday, forcing more than 1,000 to flee their homes.

Army aircraft were deployed in the northern state of Queensland, where storms generated by former tropical cyclone Oswald unleashed punishing rains and localised tornadoes and flood-

Indonesia landslides kill 11

AFP, Jakarta

Two landslides triggered by heavy rains killed at least 11 people and left 19 others missing on Indonesia's Sumatra island, officials said yesterday.

Floods and landslides are common in Indonesia, which is prone to frequent bursts of heavy rain.

Six shot dead in Egypt funerals

460 injured

AFP, Cairo

Six people were killed and more than 400 injured in Egypt's Port Said yesterday as rioting sparked by death sentences passed on fans of a local football team rocked the canal city for a second straight day.

Crowds attempted to storm three police stations and others torched a social club belonging to the armed forces, looting items inside, security officials said.

Another 460 people were injured in the rioting.

The violence comes a day after 31 people, including two anti-riot police, were killed in clashes in the Mediterranean city after a Cairo court handed down death sentences on 21 supporters of the local football club, Al-Masry.

It also follows deadly protests in Cairo on Friday against President Mohamed Morsi on the second anniversary of Egypt's uprising, highlighting deep political divisions and longstanding tensions between police and protesters.

Trouble flared on Saturday just minutes after the verdict in the trial of 2012 football riots in Port Said after a match between home side Al-Masry and Cairo's Al-Ahly that left 74 people dead.

Many Egyptians believe the deadly stadium violence was orchestrated either by police or by Mubarak supporters, and any verdict was likely to trigger a highly charged response.



Relatives of victims cry after a fire at a nightclub in Santa Maria in southern Brazil which killed 232 people early yesterday. The fire tore through a nightclub called "Kiss" during a boisterous student party, police said. (Story on page 1)

PHOTO: AFP

US govt website hacked over activist's 'killing'

BBC ONLINE

Hackers claiming to be from the activist group Anonymous have hacked a US government website in response to the death of Aaron Swartz.

Activists embedded a video statement on the homepage of the United States Sentencing Commission, an agency of the US government.

The statement referred to the death of Swartz, an internet activist who apparently killed himself in January.

"Two weeks ago today, a line was crossed," the statement said.

"Two weeks ago today, Aaron Swartz was killed. Killed because he faced an impossi-

ble choice. Killed because he was forced into playing a game he could not win."

The hackers, who had labelled the attack "Operation Last Resort", said the site was chosen for symbolic reasons.

"The federal sentencing guidelines...

enable prosecutors to cheat citizens of their constitutionally-guaranteed right to a fair trial, by a jury of their peers [and] are a clear violation of the 8th amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishments," the video statement said.

Swartz, who was 26, was facing hacking charges and is believed to have taken his own life. His federal trial was due to be held next month. If found guilty, he could have faced up to 35 years in prison.



Extradition treaty

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The treaty is going to have some refusal provisions. If extradition of someone poses a threat to national security, the country concerned might refuse the deportation request, says a home ministry high official quoting the draft.

The other deal to be signed is on a friendlier visa agreement for Bangladesh titled Revised Travel Arrangement (RTA).

According to the proposed visa pact, businesspersons would be given five-year multiple entry visa; those who want to travel on medical ground would get two-year multiple entry visa, which is extendable for one more year, reports our correspondent in New Delhi.

In case of medical purpose entry, as many as three attendants of a patient would also be entitled to visa.

Both the deals are expected to be signed at the meeting at Ruposhi Bangla Hotel in the capital, following which there would be a joint press conference.

A 15-member Indian delegation led by Shinde is set to meet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister Dipu Moni before departing Dhaka tomorrow.

A home ministry official said the draft extradition treaty with 21 articles has been vetted by the law ministry.

The treaty would authorise either of the countries to turn down an extradition request if

found improper or unjust, the official added.

He further said if controversy arises during an extradition process, the matter would be settled as per the laws of the country concerned.

This treaty, once signed, will pave the way for bringing back a number of listed top Bangladeshi criminals, who crossed the border and are allegedly running the crime world over phone.

It would also help India retrieve separatists like Ulfa General Secretary Anup Chetia, who often allegedly operates from Bangladesh illegally.

India has long been pressing for Chetia's deportation. The Ulfa leader has been in a Dhaka

jail following his arrest in 1997 on charge of entering Bangladesh without valid documents.

Chetia is still behind bars in Bangladesh as he has sought political asylum in the country.

Besides, Bangladeshi war crimes accused Abul Kalam Azad and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's convicted killer Risaldar Moshleuddin are believed to be hiding in India.

The RTA would allow one-year multiple entry under student visa.

India would also waive the 60-day cooling off period for second visit by a Bangladeshi national. The restriction is at present applicable to citizens of Pakistan, China and some

Blasts kill 23 Afghan cops in 24 hours

AFP, Kandahar

Insurgents killed a total of 23 policemen across Afghanistan within 24 hours, officials said yesterday, reflecting the increasing police role in the war before the withdrawal of Nato troops.

Thirteen died in roadside bomb blasts, while 10 were killed in a suicide attack.

A powerful bomb killed eight police officers along with three suspected bombers they had detained on the outskirts of the troubled southern city of Kandahar, provincial spokesman Jawed Faisal told AFP.

The officials blamed the bombing the Taliban. Three other policemen were killed in another roadside bombing in neighbouring Helmand and yesterday and two died in a similar attack in Farah in western Afghanistan overnight, police spokesmen said.

The incidents followed a suicide bombing in the northern city of Kunduz on Saturday that killed 10 policemen including two senior officers.

other countries.

For the first time, India and Bangladesh are also expected to exchange strip maps of their 4,096-km-long international boundary to facilitate resolving any boundary disputes locally.

A strip map is an unscaled drawing of a route to include critical points along the border, roadside features and town facilities on a simple flip-over style map. The map usually incorporates distance.

During Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011, India and Bangladesh signed a treaty to implement exchange of 162 enclaves envisaged under the 1974 Indira-Mujib accord.

The agreement on

demarcation of the border and exchange of enclaves covers 111 enclaves in India and 51 on the other side in which about 51,000 people live.

According to the agreement, the people living in the enclaves would be given the right to continue to reside there or choose their country of residence.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni at a press briefing yesterday said the Indian home minister would come to Dhaka today and there is a possibility of signing the agreements.

Asked about deportation of Anup Chetia, she said the two governments would consider extradition case by case after signing of the treaty.