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France: Hundreds of Islamist militants killed in Mali



The BBC's Andrew Harding: People displaced by militant rebels are trickling back towards Timbuktu

Mali conflict

French forces have killed several hundred Islamist militants in Mali in a month-long conflict, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has said.

The militants were killed in air strikes and direct combat with French troops, he said.

France says it intends to start pulling out of Mali in March, and has stressed the importance of African Union forces in ensuring security.

Air attacks and sporadic clashes are continuing in several parts of Mali.

France has deployed about 4,000 troops, and thousands more from the African Union are also there.

'Significant number'

Mr Le Drian said the militants died in air strikes on vehicles carrying fighters and materials, or in ground fighting in the town of Konna at the start of the campaign and later in the town of Gao.

He said French troops had inflicted "great damage on the jihadist terrorist groups", saying "several hundred, a significant number" of Islamist fighters had been killed.



This sign left behind the northern city of Gao by Islamist rebels says Sharia is the "road to paradise"

The BBC's Thomas Fessy in Mali says it is unclear how the French made their assessment of the numbers of dead.

France has suffered only one fatality, a helicopter pilot killed at the beginning of the operation.

French experts had earlier suggested the Islamist alliance could probably muster about 3,000 fighters overall.

Mr Le Drian said Malian forces had also taken prisoners including high-ranking militants who would "have to answer to Malian courts and international justice".

French forces are continuing to carry out air strikes in mountains north of Kidal where Islamists have taken refuge.

Earlier, the French military said some 1,800 soldiers from Chad had entered Kidal.

Mr Le Drian said the town was now under the control of French forces with "the support of African and in particular Chadian forces".

Meanwhile, pro-autonomy Tuareg rebels said they had occupied the north-eastern town of Menaka, but their claim could not be verified.

Analysts say the Tuareg fighters, who initially joined forces with the Islamist rebels, are seeking to maximise their territorial claim on the region.

Mali's future

The French intervened in Mali in January, fearing that al-Qaeda-linked militants who had controlled Mali's vast north since April 2012 were about to advance on the capital, Bamako.

In an interview published on Wednesday, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said French soldiers could start leaving Mali in March.

"We will continue to act in the north where some terrorist havens remain," he told Metro newspaper.

"I think that starting in March, if all goes as planned, the number of French troops could be reduced."

Meanwhile, officials from the UN, EU, African Union, the World Bank and dozens of nations met in Brussels to discuss Mali's future.

They are considering how elections can be held in July, as well as the financing of an international military force and humanitarian assistance.

