

French drone strike in Mali kills 19 civilians at wedding

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Paris, January 9 (RHC)-- A French military drone strike in Mali has reportedly killed civilians attending a wedding event in a remote village amid France's persisting military intervention in its former African colony under the pretext of fighting rising militancy in the impoverished -- though minerals-rich -- nation.

The aerial strike in central Mali's isolated Douentza area came at a moment of growing anti-French sentiment and armed resistance across the West African country in response to the eight-year military presence of the former colonial power.

An advocacy group for Fulani herders, known as Jeunesse Tabital Pulaaku, released a list on Thursday of 19 people it said were killed by the French airstrike, including the father of the groom, as well as seven others it said were injured in the attack while attending the wedding ceremony.

"Those who were killed were civilians," said the group's president, Hamadoun Dicko, as quoted in a Reuters report on Friday, noting: "Whether there were jihadists around at the moment of the raid or not, I don't know."

The report further cited a health worker, who spoke on condition of anonymity, as confirming on Tuesday that civilians had been "mistakenly hit in the strike." This is while on Thursday Mali's Paris-sponsored government and the French military denied eye-witness accounts and other reports blaming the French air strike for the civilian fatalities in the area, claiming that only Muslim militants were targeted.

The French army further insisted that the targets were "Islamist fighters," claiming that their identities were confirmed by its drones prior to the bloody attack and subsequent checks following the strike.

"No collateral damage, no sign of a festive gathering or a marriage," the French army command declared in a statement, describing the targeted site as lightly wooded and claiming that "no women or children were observed" in the area.

According to the army statement, a group of nearly 40 men was monitored by the REAPER drone for more than an hour and a half before the strike, which was carried out over one kilometer from the nearest dwellings on the edge of the village of Bounti.

Repeating the French version of events, Mali's Defense Ministry further cited surveillance images" to state, "the strike took place during a joint operation with French forces and killed about 30 militants." "There was no sign of a marriage, women or children," it added in a statement.

France maintains a military force of more than 5,100 in Mali and other former colonies in West Africa in purported efforts to counter militants it claims are linked to the al-Qaeda and Daesh terrorist groups.

The military intervention, however, has come at a cost. Five French soldiers were killed in Mali in recent days and Malian citizens have protested France's military presence in the streets as well as on social media platforms.

Hundreds of people have taken to the streets in the capital of Mali to protest against the presence of French troops in the Sahel region. Protesters gathered in a square in the center of the capital Bamako, where they burned the French flag and carried banners reading slogans such as "Down with France."

The protest came ahead of a summit in France on the country's military interventions in Africa. The latest French killing of Malian civilians came as Paris faces tough choices about how to deal with its purported moves to counter extremists in Mali and other African nations without getting bogged down in a potentially un-winnable war, according to an AFP report, which pointed to the growing number of French troops killed

since it launched a campaign to rid northern Mali of militants in January 2013.

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