

Last set of French troops exit Niger as Sahel sheds Paris' influence



A close-up of a France's flag patch worn by French troops in Africa's Sahel region as part of the anti-insurgent Operation Barkhane in Inaloglog These patches can no longer be seen in Africa's Sahel region after French forces withdrew from Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso [File: Benoit Tessier/Reuter]

Niamey, December 23 (RHC)-- The last French troops in Niger have withdrawn, marking an end to more than a decade of French operations to fight armed groups in West Africa's Sahel region. "Today's date ... marks the end of the disengagement process of French forces in the Sahel," Niger army Lieutenant Salim Ibrahim said on Friday.

France said it would pull out its roughly 1,500 soldiers and pilots from its former colony after Niger's military government demanded they depart after a coup on July 26.

It was the third time in less than 18 months that French troops have been sent packing from a country in the Sahel. They were forced to leave fellow former colonies Mali last year and Burkina Faso earlier this year after recent military takeovers in those countries too.

All three nations are battling rebel violence that erupted in northern Mali in 2012, later spreading to Niger and Burkina Faso. But a string of coups in the region since 2020 – and consequent rise in anti-French sentiments among the people – have seen relations nosedive with France and pivot towards greater rapprochement with Russia.

The French exit from Niger leaves hundreds of United States military personnel and a number of Italian and German soldiers remaining in the country. Military leaders in Niamey this month said they would also end two European Union security and defence missions in the country.

France's withdrawal from Mali left a bitter aftertaste when the bases it once occupied in Menaka, Gossi and Timbuktu were rapidly taken over by Russia's Wagner paramilitary group. In September, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of all French troops from Niger by the end of the year. The first contingent left in October.

Most French soldiers in Niger were at an air base in Niamey. Smaller groups were deployed alongside Nigerien soldiers at the border with Mali and Burkina Faso, where armed groups linked to ISIL (ISIS) and al-Qaeda are believed to operate.

The withdrawal was a complex operation with convoys having to drive up to 1,700km (1,000 miles) on sometimes perilous desert routes to the French centre for Sahel operations in neighbouring Chad.

The first French convoy of troops withdrawing from Niger arrived in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, after 10 days on the road. From Chad, French troops can leave by air with their most sensitive equipment although most of the rest has to be moved by land and sea.

A source told the Agence France-Presse news agency on the condition of anonymity that some of the French containers carrying equipment were to be driven from Chad to the port of Douala in Cameroon before they sailed to France.

France's former ally in Niger, overthrown President Mohamed Bazoum, remains under house arrest. A U.S. official said in October that Washington was keeping about 1,000 military personnel in Niger but was no longer actively training or assisting Niger forces.

Washington said this month that it was ready to resume cooperation with Niger on the condition its military government committed to a rapid transition to civilian rule. Niger's rulers want up to three years for a transition back to a civilian government.

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