IPS

INTERVIEWS 27.04.2026

‘The situation in Mali appears to be slowly calming down’

Svenja Bode on the new wave of violence in Mali, Russia’s role and the limits of international influence

Jihadists and rebels have jointly attacked the army in Mali. What is the situation on the ground?

The situation in Mali appears to be slowly calming down, though the weekend was marked by an unprecedentedly well-coordinated wave of attacks on Malian army and administrative structures. On Saturday morning, jihadists and the FLA, an alliance of separatist rebels, attacked key cities in Mali, in some cases jointly. The capital Bamako and the international airport were affected, as were Kati – a garrison town 15 kilometres north of the capital and home to most high-ranking military personnel – as well as Gao, Sévaré and Kidal.

Over the weekend, there were instances of intense fighting and attacks. The most senior confirmed casualty is Defence Minister Sadio Camara, who belonged to the inner circle of the military-led government in power since 2021. He was killed in a suicide bombing at his home in Kati. The head of the secret service and the army chief of staff are also reported to have been injured. There have been no official reports on their fate so far.

The Malian army and its allies, such as the Russian Africa Corps and presumably also the AES, a military alliance of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, responded with a ground and air offensive. The situation in Bamako has since calmed down. A night-time curfew has been imposed from 9 pm to 6 am, and the international airport has resumed operations. In Gao, too, the Malian armed forces have regained the upper hand. In Sévaré and Kati, the fighting is believed to be continuing. Kidal appears to have been recaptured from the rebels.

The town of Kidal in northern Mali has been regarded as a strategically important location for years. Why is it so significant?

Although Kidal is a comparably small town, it holds considerable political significance. It symbolises the territorial integrity of the state of Mali and, at the same time, the government's claim to assert its authority even in the remote north. For the separatist Azawad movement, however, Kidal embodies the quest for self-determination and ethnic identity.

As a historic centre of power and an important hub for trade, the town became the focus of international attention by 2012, when it was captured by rebels and jihadist groups fighting for an independent Azawad state, which today operate under names such as the FLA. In 2013, Kidal was recaptured by French and Malian troops, but as early as 2014, following renewed clashes – partly in connection with a visit by the then Prime Minister Moussa Mara – the city fell back into the hands of separatist forces.

Subsequently, Kidal took on strong symbolic significance under both the civilian government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and the subsequent military government. The recapture of the city in autumn 2023 was seen as a demonstrative success for the leadership established after the 2021 coup, which is striving for the military stabilisation of the country. The renewed capture of Kidal through coordinated attacks by jihadist and separatist groups, therefore, represents a significant setback and casts doubt on the effectiveness of this strategy.

Neither military capabilities nor intelligence gathering appear to be sufficient to contain JNIM, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist alliance in the Sahel region, and the FLA. Furthermore, Kidal was mainly taken and held by forces of the Africa Corps. Over the weekend, these forces negotiated their withdrawal from the former MINUSMA camp towards the south. Their weapons apparently remained with the FLA. What happened to the remaining Malian troops on the ground has not yet been conclusively clarified.

The UN mission MINUSMA was deployed in Mali until the end of 2023. At the request of the Malian military government, the deployment of the international peacekeeping force was terminated. Was this step a mistake from today's perspective?

An international peacekeeping mission can only remain in a country for as long as the host country wishes it to. MINUSMA had to comply with the Malian government's request for a withdrawal. Ultimately, every sovereign state must decide for itself who is active within its own borders. Furthermore, MINUSMA was one of the most expensive UN missions in history, with a complex structure and a remit not limited to military matters. Many say, with the benefit of

hindsight, that it was overburdened with expectations and tasks. I would agree with that. Nevertheless, it was an attempt by the international community to respond to the complex situation in Mali in the 2010s. Ultimately, however, it failed to live up to its ambitions, and bringing the mission to an end was probably the sensible thing to do. However, the manner of this conclusion – relatively sudden and with few arrangements for an orderly handover of infrastructure, equipment and personnel to the Malian government – is open to debate.

In 2023, the Malian government was willing to adopt a new approach and expand its partnerships. That is its right. To this end, it sought support from the Russian Wagner Group and Russia's Africa Corps, as well as from Turkey and China, to implement its new, heavily military-focused strategy to contain jihadist groups and separatist forces. This approach initially appeared successful, as Kidal was recaptured. By this weekend, however, it had become clear that this strategy is insufficient. Purely military approaches cannot address the root causes of the jihadists' increasing mobilisation, such as the severely inadequate provision of public goods like water, education, jobs and healthcare. Human rights violations by partners and the Malian armed forces also contribute to further alienation from the central government.

The Malian government must now decide how to adapt to the new situation, firstly so as not to fall victim to these developments itself, and secondly to restore prospects for life and development for the population.

What role is Russia currently playing in the conflict — and how has its influence in Mali changed?

The historical ties between Russia and Mali date back to the Cold War era and are based on language exchanges, study visits and government cooperation. More recently, too, key figures in Mali, including the late Minister of Defence, received their further education – both military and civilian – in Russia. When the international community failed to meet the high expectations of the Malian government, it turned once again to its old partner. From a European perspective, this occurred at a very critical geopolitical juncture, just as Russia had attacked Ukraine, and was therefore interpreted as a clear departure from Western values. This aspect should not be completely ignored, but nor should it be overemphasised. Mali opened up not only to Russia, but also to other partners such as Turkey, China and the United Arab Emirates. These states were prepared to supply the resources necessary for Mali's military strategy — something Europe, for understandable reasons,

was never fully prepared to do.

As far as Russia's current influence in Mali is concerned, it is clear from today's perspective that Russia made more promises than it was ultimately able to keep. Whether it be the Wagner Group or, later, the Africa Corps, the military successes have been rather mixed. The Africa Corps is accused of having committed human rights violations and of failing to cooperate sufficiently with the Malian armed forces. Furthermore, the financial cost of the cooperation appears to be very high, leaving it open to question whether the cooperation actually helps Mali that much. Mali has also procured military equipment from Russia. However, an agreement to build a nuclear power plant to improve the already severely inadequate electricity supply has not yet been implemented. Following the events of last weekend, both sides will need to assess whether the partnership can be continued in a meaningful and beneficial way. Few long-term successes are apparent so far.

In your view, is there still room for action for the EU at present?

In my view, the scope for action for the EU is severely limited. In this context, both our own values and interests must be taken into account, as well as the willingness of the military-led government in Mali to cooperate. Offers from the European side should continue to be made. Ultimately, it is up to the Malian side to decide whether these are accepted or discussed jointly.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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