

Daily Press Briefing: Discussion of Mali

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March 8, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, selections on Mali
Washington, DC

QUESTION: A newspaper editor in Mali was detained by security forces this week after reporting on what his publication alleged was a financial settlement package for Captain Sanogo, essentially to make him go away. Is the United States aware of any such financial settlement package for the coup leader?

MS. NULAND: I can't speak to whether the reports that the Malian journalist put forward are accurate. What I can say is that we are obviously concerned by arrests of any journalists in Mali and about freedom of expression.

QUESTION: You've spoken about the need for the elements of the military who are allied with Captain Sanogo to lower their involvement with the transitional government. Do you believe that that's happening?

MS. NULAND: Well, as you know, we have been supportive of the European Union effort to get in now and start training the Malian military and to peel them off the coup plotters and to encourage them to support a democratic process, to support new elections, to break with Sanogo. So we're very much supportive of that process. It's going to take some time, I think.

QUESTION: The French have announced that they will begin withdrawing their troops next month. Do you believe that the African force is in position to take up the slack?

MS. NULAND: Well, as you know, AFISMA forces as well as Malian forces have been working well with the French. AFISMA forces continue to flow in. There are now some 6,200 troops from AFISMA nations in Mali beginning to backfill so that the French can meet their withdrawal timetables. When we were in Paris, the Secretary spoke quite extensively both with President Hollande and with Foreign Minister Fabius about ensuring that as the French withdraw, both Malian and AFISMA forces are ready. And I think there was very clear agreement that this has to be done in an orderly way so that the gains are maintained and that we have a secure and stable environment for the elections that we all want to see in July.

March 4, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing: Selections on Mali
Washington, DC

QUESTION: Last week we had reports about the death of Abou Zeid, which al-Qaida itself now seems to be confirming. And over the weekend in Mali --

MR. VENTRELL: Yeah.

QUESTION: -- and over the weekend there were reports that another Islamist leader, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, has been killed. Do you have any information you can share with us?

MR. VENTRELL: Yeah. So we have seen reports that AQIM leader Mokhtar bel Mokhtar was killed on March 2nd by French and Chadian forces. We have no confirmation of bel Mokhtar's current status, so we refer you to French and Chadian authorities. And also we have reports that the commander of al-Qaida in the Islamic Magreb's Mali wing, Abou Zeid, was killed on March 2nd by French and Chadian forces, but we're also not able to confirm that at this time. So on both of these cases, we really refer you to the French and Chadian officials.

QUESTION: Well, I think -- isn't one of the issues that the Chadians are saying that he's dead but the French haven't necessarily confirmed? So until they both confirm, is that when you would take confirmation?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, we as the U.S. Government are not able to confirm either case either independently or otherwise. So we're just not in a position to do that. But we'll continue to wait to hear more from our counterparts.

QUESTION: Well, what's the U.S. assessment about how the fighting is going on the ground?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have an update on the fighting. You know that we continue to -- we've repeatedly affirmed our support for the French mission, for the African troops that have deployed, regional efforts to counter the terrorist groups in the region. But in terms of what's happened on the ground recently, I don't have anything updated overnight or in the past day or so. But I'll look into it and see if we have any more information on the ground.

You know, Jo, that what we really want is -- of course, the French have made significant gains, but we want them to hold those gains and be able to turn over to the African counterparts as quickly as they can. So we support that process. That's why we're providing significant assistance. But that's the broad stroke, the broad frame of what we're looking for in Mali. But let me see if I have a ground situation update for you.

QUESTION: The French Defense Minister Yves Le Drian was saying at one point that they hope to leave by March and turn it over. Do you think that's a realistic timetable, timeframe?

MR. VENTRELL: I can't really make an observation one way or the other, other than to say we're working very hard. Obviously, there are some plans up at the UN to see how we can put the African-led international support mission in Mali under UN authority. We think that would help speed and provide an appropriate framework. But in terms of timing, I just don't have anything for you.

QUESTION: Do you have an update on the UN efforts, whether there's a resolution due this week?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't. I know we continue to work up in New York, but I don't have an update on our diplomacy up in New York.

February 27, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, Selections on Mali
Washington, DC

QUESTION: France is planning to create a beyond-the-horizon force in order to make rapid and quick military operations in **Mali**. Meanwhile, the U.S. has deployed some forces in Niger to set up a base for U.S. drones. Do you – can you share with us any information about any coordination between the United States and France? And also, does this have any relation with the possibility of transferring the headquarters of AFRICOM from Germany to one of the African countries in order to battle the influence of al-Qaida in the region?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, first, anything about AFRICOM's location, I'd refer you to DOD. That's absolutely a DOD issue.

First of all, on Mali, you saw the Secretary today where he commended the leadership France has demonstrated and talked about how we'll continue to support our ally with intelligence, lift, and other needs. We are working as a government, the U.S., to support the African-led mission. We've given some \$96 million – excuse me, let me correct that – we have \$96 million that we've obligated, of which we've spent – let me get this right – we've obligated \$40 million and we're about to notify an additional \$51 million, and then another \$5 million for foreign police units.

So, again, we have some significant financial assistance that we're giving to this mission, and we've got a shared goal with our French ally. You know this was absolutely a discussion that the Secretary had with his counterpart in France today.

In terms of what you're talking about, in terms of the location of this new – of military forces in Niger, I refer you to DOD. That's something for them. But the other thing I'd highlight about what the Secretary said on Mali today, he talked about the security cooperation, but I also really highlight for you his message on the need to get Mali back on track democratically, and to get their institutions back on track, to get their rule of law back on track.

And so we'll continue to support the security track, but Mali also needs to restore its capacity for justice, and it's just as important for them to work on these important matters of democracy and institutions.

February 21, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, Selections on Mali
Washington, DC

MS. NULAND: -- Mali? Yeah.

QUESTION: There was fighting today in Gao. What is your understanding of the security situation now in this campaign in the north?

MS. NULAND: I thought I had something on that. We have seen, obviously, reports that there is fierce fighting around Gao. I would refer you, obviously, to the French, who have forces in that neighborhood. I think you know what they are engaged in, working with the Mali military. They're trying to ensure that the city – the major cities are secured, but also that they are able to track and chase those extremists who may be trying to melt into the hills or melt into the sand, and to prepare the way for AFISMA forces to come in behind and support the Mali military. But this is very much a work in progress.

QUESTION: They've made clear that they'd like to get their troops out of there as soon as the AFISMA force is operational. Will the timing of that be part of Secretary Kerry's talks in Paris on Mali? You mentioned that Mali would be an issue in Paris.

MS. NULAND: Certainly it will be something that we talk about when the Secretary is there and has a chance to see President Hollande and Foreign Minister Fabius. But even in advance of that, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Don Yamamoto is in Paris today having bilateral talks on how the French see the mission moving forward, on how they see AFISMA being supported by the UN family, et cetera. So I think we're very much engaged with the French.

QUESTION: Human Rights Watch is out today calling on the government in Mali to investigate and prosecute soldiers responsible for torture and summary execution as part of this campaign. Given the somewhat tenuous nature of this provisional government and, as you've discussed before, the continuing influence of the military – elements of the military over that, do you think that this government in Bamako has the goal to prosecute soldiers responsible for human rights abuses?

MS. NULAND: We certainly agree that accountability has got to be part of the healing process going forward, both in terms of accountability with regard to the terrorists, but certainly accountability with regard to those members of the Mali military or security forces who may have – who may be guilty of atrocities against their own people. But I think before we can get to a serious Mali-owned process, we've got to have a political transition in Mali. As you know, their own roadmap calls for elections in July. So the goal of the international community is to support them in having security conditions, allow those elections to go forward, to have a

democratically elected government that can then pursue justice and accountability for the people of Mali.

QUESTION: So it's your opinion that this accountability should wait for a properly democratically elected government?

MS. NULAND: I didn't want to imply that. I just think that we all understand the fragility of the security situation right now, the fact that Malian institutions have been stressed and confronted by the political instability. So all of these have to move in parallel.

February 14, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC

Selections on Mali

QUESTION: Just following up on UN peacekeeping missions, were there discussions today about changing the Mali AFISMA force to becoming a UN peacekeeping mission?

MS. NULAND: There was a good, thorough discussion of where we are in Mali as French forces working with the Malian military and now with AFISMA forces continue their work. The conversation began with the discussion of UN support for the political track, and for the elections in July. As you know, the roadmap calls for having elections on July 30.

They did also discuss the question and the proposal that is being worked at the UN about whether AFISMA would move from its current ECOWAS status to being a formal UN peacekeeping mission. There's some considerable amount of work that the UN needs to do, it says, before it will be ready to move forward with that, but I think they're obviously working on that. And the Secretary made clear that we would be supportive of making AFISMA a formal UN mission.

QUESTION: And a follow-up on that. Was there also discussion about MONUSCO and how effective it's been?

MS. NULAND: There was, and the Secretary General had some specific proposals in the context of the Great Lakes conversation and the summit that they're hoping to hold. But I'll refer you to the UN for the ideas that they have.

Please, Lalit.

QUESTION: On the Secretary's phone call to the Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar. Do you have a readout of that?

MS. NULAND: Lalit, I'm going to get that for you separately. I've been running around this morning, and I didn't get a chance to get it.

January 30, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC

Selections on Mali

QUESTION: Today, the French troops have entered Kidal, which was the last stronghold held by the Islamic militants. And they seem to be meeting a fair amount of – a lack of resistance, really. And I wondered if you could talk to us about the situation on the ground, whether there's a fear that these extremist groups could actually just be dispersing and heading into the hills and regrouping. And that actually it could take a lot longer to get rid of them.

MS. NULAND: Well we, obviously, are pleased by the success that French and Malian forces have had and the retreat of the rebels and the extremists. We understand that French and Malian forces now control Timbuktu and Gao. The mayors of both of those cities who had fled to Bamako have come back to their respective cities and resumed work. And as you say, we understand that French troops are now at the airport in Kidal.

We also understand that Malian officials have sent gendarmes into Gao and into Timbuktu to assure security. They've also made strong statements against reprisals, and we echo the calls that Malians are making, that French are making, urging Malian private citizens to refrain from retaliating against Tuaregs or other ethnic minorities. We obviously condemn any attacks on civilians. We also support the calls from Malian officials and civil society leaders appealing for calm and their statements that there will be no impunity for human rights abuses.

Obviously, you point to the right next challenge, Jo, which is not only to ensure that these cities that have been regained and towns can be held, but that the international mission, the AFISMA mission, moves in behind Malian forces and the French to stabilize northern Mali, to go after the rebels where they have fled to and ensure that they can't come back and regroup. So it's in that context that we welcome the fact that there are some 1,400 AFISMA country troops now in Mali from Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Chad. There are Nigerians on their way, and we are continuing our efforts through our ACOTA training to ensure sustainment training backfill for those forces as well.

QUESTION: And is there any update on American aid to the ECOWAS forces or to the AFISMA?

MS. NULAND: We announced yesterday that we intend to provide, subject to congressional notification, a total now of \$96 million in support for AFISMA troops. I think on Monday I announced 40. We've now notified Congress of an addition 50 million. Eight million has already been allocated to provide for basic logistical support for the initial ECOWAS contingency,

including immediate transport and equipment. Five million will go to assist formed police units that will start to deploy. These are ECOWAS country police units, not Malian police units. And we've notified this additional money that'll go for equipment, logistical support, and advisory support for AFISMA troops.

I would also note, as you know, that there was a donors conference earlier this week run by the AU. And the total funding pledged was some 455.5 million. So that is an excellent show of resolve by the international community. Big donors were the EU, the AU, Germany, Bahrain.

QUESTION: The Malian President is saying that he hopes to arrange elections by July 31st, which is actually slightly later than the timetable that you guys were hoping for. You were hoping for April. Does – what do you – what's the U.S. comment on that?

MS. NULAND: Well, we talked about this a little bit on Monday. We all, obviously, want to see these elections as soon as possible so that democracy can be restored. But we also have to appreciate that it – they can't be held until they are technically feasible. So we do note that the new Malian assembly's roadmap speaks about July. It'll be important to meet that target in terms of security, et cetera.

Please, Scott.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) Is there now an agreement with Niger to base U.S. drones in Niger?

MS. NULAND: Well, I think you saw some statements that we put out yesterday making clear that after more than a year of work, we have now signed a Status of Forces Agreement with the Government of Niger. I'm obviously not going to get into intelligence issues, but this enables us to work more closely in military-to-military channels and other channels with the Government of Niger on issues that we share concerns about. Obviously Mali is front and center, and we're working with them on this AFISMA deployment as well.

QUESTION: Was this done in connection with the French, or it's only the U.S.?

MS. NULAND: Well, obviously we coordinate with the French in our approach. The French, as you know, are focused on their activities in Mali and on the EU training mission for Malians, as we and other countries are focused on getting the ECOWAS forces up and in.

January 28, 2013

Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC

QUESTION: As the French forces and West African forces push Islamists, AQIM, north, is the United States working with Algeria to ensure that the Algerian-Malian border is secured so that these Islamist or AQIM folks don't just keep moving north?

MS. NULAND: Well, we have obviously been working with Algeria all the way through. It has its own ties into northern Mali, its own view on the situation. As you know, when the Secretary was in Algiers in October, this was a very intense topic of conversation. We've obviously been in conversation with them since, and particularly in light of the hostage-taking of a week and a half ago.

Just to confirm what you've probably already seen— that on the French wish list of ISR lift and aerial refueling, we have now gone forward as well with the aerial refueling and that has begun.

QUESTION: Is it still your position that there can be – that there should be new elections on schedule, which I think is like April, and is that reasonable given what's going on there now?

MS. NULAND: Well, as you know, we have said all along that there has to be more than a purely security solution to the problems in Mali, that the security track and the political track have to go hand-in-hand, that a key component of returning stability to Mali includes new elections and overturning the results of the coup firmly. The date had been in April. I think, obviously, we're not going to prejudge whether security's going to be restored in a manner that's going to enable that. What we want is a national unity conversation about what's appropriate and security standards so that elections can go forward as soon as possible.

QUESTION: Toria, just to go back to your previous answer, do you believe that in agreeing to provide air-to-air refueling capability for French aircraft over Mali, or travelling to Mali, that you are becoming – that the U.S., that the United States is becoming a co-belligerent in this conflict?

MS. NULAND: Well, obviously we have a number of legal things to work through, which is what took a little bit of time. With regard to the precise legal underpinnings here, I'm going to send you to our brothers and sisters at the Department of Defense. What I will say is that the U.S. military is not going to be engaged in combat operations in Mali, and we don't expect U.S. forces to become directly involved on the ground in combat either. So this is a discrete set of missions in support of our French ally in the efforts that they are making to support the people of Mali.

QUESTION: Toria, can you give us an assessment of what's happening on the ground in Mali? Because there are reports that fighters have been expelled from Gao, airports and roads around Timbuktu, and this building had guided us towards that definition – the U.S. definition of stability, including expelling rebels from those two particular towns. What is the U.S. view now?

MS. NULAND: Well, let me start by saying I think with regard to the precise ground situation and the advances that French and Malian troops have been able to make, you're going to get the best ground information from the French, obviously. But we've, obviously, seen the reports that French and Malian forces now control all the access roads to Timbuktu, including the roads in and out of the city and the airport. We're awaiting confirmation of these reports from the French or from others.

We've also seen reports that French troops have seized and secured the entrance and the airfield in Gao, and we have unconfirmed reports that the terrorist elements have left Kidal. But beyond that, I don't have anything specific. We're also not able to confirm this report of damage to the historic library in Timbuktu.

January 25, 2013

**Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing
Washington, DC**

QUESTION: There have been increasingly harsher tones coming out of Paris both from the President, President Hollande, and the Defense Minister with regard to the determination of the French of going further to clean up this situation in Mali, whereas initially it was seen on the French side as a temporary operation by French troops which would be replaced by these ECOWAS. The French were not so inclined to get deeply involved in Francophone Africa for obvious reasons. They are treated like heroes, people are putting out French flags, but that's not going to last forever if the French remain a long time.

Now, after the statements of Prime Minister Cameron, the intervention, I think, of the EU is going to get involved in this. This looks like it's going to be a much longer war and more serious operation. What is the U.S. view of the situation as it's developing in Mali?

MS. NULAND: Well, let me just commend to you some of the comments that the Secretary made during her Benghazi hearings with regard to the challenge that we are all having to confront, not only in Mali but in the entire region. I think she obviously spoke quite eloquently about the challenge; that it's not only a security challenge but it's also a challenge of governance and democracy and values. Our understanding of the ground situation is that French and Malian forces have been able to have some success in recent days. We talked about Diabali the other day and Kona. They are now taking up positions in the city of Menaka, which is just to the east of Gao, and moving up into Gao and Timbuktu.

But you're not wrong that the strategy here depends on both Malian and ECOWAS forces being able to come in behind, secure the gains, not only hold them but extend them, and also prepare the country for a restoration of democracy through elections this spring. So in that context, as you know, in addition to supporting some of the French requests, we are focusing our efforts on facilitating the ECOWAS forces, the AFISMA forces to get into Mali. Our understanding is that there are currently some 600 AFISMA troops in Mali, including 44 African staff at ECOWAS headquarters. We've got 162 from Nigeria, 50 from Benin, 204 from Togo, 36 from Senegal, 159 from Burkina. And we have some 500-plus Nigerian troops on the Niger border getting ready to go in.

The U.S. is also, as we've been talking about, using our ACOTA facility to work with Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Togo, Ghana in the coming weeks to ensure that they can sustain and continue these deployments, and with longer-term training in terms of what'll be necessary to not only come in behind the French, but also to train and support the Malian forces in eventually being able to secure their country themselves.

Special Briefing - January 16, 2013

Senior State Department Official
Washington, DC

QUESTION: Just a quick one on Mali – a couple things. The legal basis for lifting and entering Mali – what would that be? Are there any issues that need to be resolved on that considering the coup and – well, I guess you're not dealing directly on military cooperation with the Malian government? And then --

MODERATOR: For lifting ECOWAS forces, is that what you're asking?

QUESTION: For lifting whoever – French, ECOWAS – for basically entering the theater of the conflict.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me just say very clearly again that under current U.S. law we are prohibited from providing any direct assistance to the current Malian government. U.S. law clearly states that we must break off all but humanitarian assistance when a democratically elected government has been overthrown by a military regime. We will help ECOWAS countries and other African countries to help stabilize the situation, and we will help transport them into the region. But we will not help directly Malian forces. This is what the French are doing. This is what the European training mission is going to be deployed to do. Our assistance will be complementary, but it will not be direct in any way to the Malian authorities. And I think that's the great distinction.

QUESTION: Yeah, but – sorry. If you enter Mali to bring French troops there, what's the authority that you can enter Mali? It's not – the French don't give you authority to enter Mali – by troops, bring troops closer to the battle.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. The Malian Government made a specific request of the United States, as they did the French, several days ago for assistance in combating the threat posed by the rebels in the north. And so we do not expect any difficulty in arranging for transportation of ECOWAS or African troops into Mali if that is what we do.

MODERATOR: And if I might just add to that: It's all in support of UN Security Council Resolution 2085, which the Malian Government has welcomed. Yeah.

QUESTION: The French thing is – would be based on – if you took French troops into Mali --

MODERATOR: That's how the French – the French have notified the Security Council that they are operating pursuant to 2085 and at the invitation of the Malian Government. Let's move on.

QUESTION: And this official request by the Malian Government, which clearly has a military goal at the end, you don't consider military cooperation in any way with the Malian Government?

MODERATOR: Obviously, we are working through all of these legal issues, but we are –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We are working through the legal issues, but we are confident that we can, in fact, move ECOWAS troops into Mali in accordance with 2085 and in accordance with current existing laws.

MODERATOR: Anne?

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Well, just to clarify, though, we're talking about two potential movements here – the movement of French forces and reinforcements for the operation and support of the Malian Government, which the French responded, and secondarily, the ECOWAS forces. Is there any legal distinction for the United States in troop transport? And then what – under what basis would the air force – presumably personnel required to fly – what would there – once they're on the ground, how are they able to protect themselves?

MODERATOR: On that last one, that's a DOD –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: DOD.

MODERATOR: That's a DOD issue, Anne, so –

QUESTION: But I mean, that's an obvious question, right? I mean, you are going to have U.S. forces in-country, and I assume that's something that you guys (inaudible) about.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me say that it may seem – there are two issues here. The one that we are dealing with at State is for us fairly clear at this juncture, and it's one that we faced repeatedly in dealing with Somalia. When I say that we are prepared to transport troops from ECOWAS countries into Mali, there are multiple ways in which that can be done in which there are no U.S. military involved. We can, first, hire the aircraft of a African country to fly the troops in. Nigeria or South Africa has lift and capacity. We can say that we will pay for their fuel and their air time to move those troops in.

Secondly, we can go out to a major contractor, commercial, in Europe or in Africa, and say to them, "Would you be prepared to lift troops and equipment from these ECOWAS countries into theater?" We would pay for that. We could even ask a non-African country if they wanted to rent their aircraft to do it. So it doesn't require, from our vantage point, to do the things that we intend to do, and we are supportive of doing, for us to have troops on the ground.

The other questions you'll have to address to DOD. We have helped move Ugandan troops into Somalia, we've helped move Burundian troops in, and all of this has been done through commercial and/or other African military aircraft.

QUESTION: One separate follow-up --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: And we would pay for that out of our authorities.

QUESTION: What is the difference between not paying for lethal arms at the outset, but paying for ammunition in the resupply? How does that work?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not going to get into that because we're not even contemplating that in Mali. What we are contemplating -- when we say "train and equip," we're thinking about a lot of very basic training, and we're talking about a lot of very basic equipment that has nothing to do with the lethal equipment. It's ensuring that all the soldiers have flashlights, all the soldiers have water canteens, all the soldiers have a medical kit and equipment, all the soldiers will be able to have a kitchen facility that they can eat at on a regular basis, that each unit has a medical supply unit with the appropriate equipment to be able to handle a range of accidents or lethal or semi-lethal wounds. It is ensuring that they have Kevlar vests and helmets, and the proper equipment for boots and uniforms, that they have malaria prophylaxis. There are a number of things that are there.

We also, in the training aspect of this, want to make sure that they have the appropriate maps, that they have the appropriate GPS systems. There are many things that we can do that will help ensure that this will be an operation that's successful for them.

MODERATOR: So just to clarify, yesterday the podium briefer made an error in making reference to lethal support. It's purely nonlethal.

QUESTION: Do you have a sense from the French what their exit plan is, what their game plan is, our advice to the French on that? And do you really think that ECOWAS is up to the task? Because as far as I know, they've offered about 3,000 troops, which a lot of analysts have just called tokenism. It's been the same plan that they've offered month after month.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Let me say to the first part, you'd have to ask the French what their exit plan is. We have seen the statements from President Hollande. We have seen the statements from Foreign Minister Fabius, and they say their desire is to go in, stop the current rebel offensive, to stabilize the situation, prepare the ground for the ECOWAS forces, and then to leave the country. That is what it appears they want to do.

With the second question on ECOWAS -- generally, do I believe that ECOWAS has the capacity to do the job, to provide a security and intervention force? Based on past history, the answer is

yes. Look at the success of the operations backed by ECOWAS in both Liberia and in Sierra Leone. They have engaged. They have put troops on the ground in West African countries. And they have been successful in their partners and in their collaboration with others in helping to turn around both Liberia and Sierra Leone. They have made commitments, I think, and we'll see how those commitments are fulfilled in the days ahead.

QUESTION: I have a few questions. The first is I just want to be – I just want clarification as to whether the ECOWAS force will be fighting alongside the Malian army and whether that is a violation at all of U.S. law? Secondly, I have questions about the funding mechanism for the ECOWAS force and if we are going to be the primary funders, in term – I know you just said that we're not going to pay the salaries. So who will be paying salaries, if the host countries will be paying salaries? And then thirdly, I wonder what kind of lessons you might have learned from the AMISOM mission and the AMISOM force that you're applying to ECOWAS?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Lots of questions, Dana. First of all, it is important that the Africans maintain a leadership role in the fight against AQIM and radicalism, not only in Mali but across the Sahel. The ECOWAS countries will be fighting alongside of a Malian military, but it is an ECOWAS military, not a U.S. military, so they don't have any prohibitions. All we're doing is assisting them to get there and assisting them to be really prepared after they arrive in country. It's their national decision, and it's also in their national interest to be working to get rid of AQIM, not only in Mali but because of the potential threat that it poses to the regional states.

Funding. We expect that funding will come from a variety of sources and a variety of nations. What I've done is to outline roughly what we are prepared to do in support of ECOWAS. We know, again, emerging from UN Security Council Resolution 2085, that the French are going to work with the European community to bring some 250 European military trainers into Mali to help to train, strengthen, and rehabilitate the Malian military. We will not have any role in that. This will be something that the Europeans take on. This is something that other countries may voluntarily pay for themselves.

We have not, for example, been paying salaries for the AMISOM troops in Somalia. We have had pre-deployment training programs. We have had sustainment programs and equipping programs, but we have not paid salaries for the Ugandans, for the Burundians, for the Djiboutians, for the Kenyans, or Sierra Leoneans. That money has largely come from funding through the European community. We do not plan to provide salaries to soldiers who are in Mali doing work on behalf of their own countries. So we'll do that.

Lessons learned from AMISOM and Somalia. There are many, but I won't say anything, other than it is important to ensure that the African nations and leaders in the region are committed to the effort, see the problem the same, and are willing to effectively work together to eliminate it.

In the case of Somalia, there was unanimity within the East African community. There was unanimity within IGAD. There was unanimity within the AU. And that also was clear, that there was unanimity within the international community. We do best if we are in a strong supporting and sustaining role and not in a role in which we are taking the lead. This is primarily an African problem, which has both regional and international dimensions, and therefore we should help support, but we believe it's important that the Africans maintain a leadership role in recognition of where the problem is and how it could impact them most directly.

QUESTION: On the ECOWAS side of things, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you see as a potential timeline here. There has been talk out of the region that ECOWAS – certainly some elements of ECOWAS – are hoping to have their troops on the ground within 48 hours, which, given the amount of training and equipping that you're talking, about seems maybe optimistic. How quickly do you expect you will be able to roll out what you see as necessary as far as the training and equipping goes, and what does that mean for a timeline for actually getting them in place?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't know the timelines. Various countries have said various things both publicly and privately, so I'm not going to try to say here when people are actually going to move. I will say that some countries have indicated that they are prepared to move quickly. Those countries probably will not rely initially on any pre-deployment training or equipment packages from us. They may, on their second or third rotations, come to us and say, "Will you give us training and assistance?" And we're prepared to take a hard look at any request that comes to us.

We do, as I say, have funding available now to do train-and-equip packages, and we are prepared to entertain this. We have told all of the members of ECOWAS that we are prepared to do this, and we have notified we have a pocket of money right now for – that we can use immediately. We've notified Congress that we are going to reprogram additional monies so that it will be available for use to fulfill the commitments that were made in this building.

MODERATOR: Okay. Nicolas.

QUESTION: This is a follow-up to Michele's question. France has said that they will send up to 2,500 soldiers, which is a big number of soldiers for a small country like France. It's roughly the number of people they have sent to Afghanistan for 10 years involvement. So don't – is it not, for the U.S., an indication that the conflict – the French involvement would last months, if not years, and that there is no clear exit plan for the French, and that eventually the U.S. could be dragged into the conflict?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: That's a question for France.

MODERATOR: Only a slightly loaded question there.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: That's a question for the French Government. It's not a question for Washington policymakers to determine for the French. The French will determine what is in their best interest. They will determine how long they plan to stay. It's not for us to have any kind of judgment on what they are doing.

They have made a serious commitment based on what they see as a serious security situation, and they've made it in response to a request from the Malian Government and from other states in the region. But I can't tell you what the French Government is thinking. You'd have to address that question to them.

QUESTION: You've always said it has to be African-led, so I wonder if you're advising the French on this one. I mean, you've been talking about this with the French for the past year.

MODERATOR: The French themselves have said that they are doing this preparatory to the ECOWAS force coming in.

We're going to take two more quick ones and then I need to let [Senior State Department Official] go.

QUESTION: In your requests to the French, you make no judgment at all on the merits of their mission, on the goals and on the scope of it?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We support what the French are doing. They have gone in at the request of the Malian Government and also at the request of other states in the region. Their reasons for doing so are clear. It was to stop what appeared to be a major offensive by the rebels to move into the southern part of the country. If the rebels had been successful in their efforts, it might have meant a collapse of the Malian Government and a larger and bigger control of the Malian territory by AQIM and rebels and Islamists.

QUESTION: Thanks for doing this. These U.S. efforts of support in the various forms are aimed at helping to stabilize Mali. What's the U.S. Government's definition of what constitutes "stabilize"? And can you give us an assessment of the strength of AQIM and other extremist groups? The parallel is often made that this is a potential Afghanistan. Is that a fair comparison?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: For me, stabilization is comprised of both a political and a security element, and it attempts to deal with all of the three major concerns that I've outlined before. I think that it is absolutely critical that the Malian Government put in place a strategic roadmap and a timetable for the return of a democratic government.

Second, I think that it is important for the Malian Government to negotiate a credible and durable solution to the political grievances of northerners, including Tuareg.

And thirdly, I think it is important for the Malian Government, along with ECOWAS and elements of the international community, to effectively break the stranglehold that rebels have over northern Mali. That does not mean the capture, elimination of every northern rebel, but it does mean a significant move towards the liberation of major cities and towns in the north, including places like Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal.

QUESTION: Sure. Picking up on Margaret's point, this idea of the Malian Government, the U.S. isn't engaging with it, but yet it knows that there is an emergency that the Malian Government is facing. Obviously, the U.S. would rather see some other form of government there. Is there any leverage diplomatically that the U.S. is trying to use to bring about a change in the political situation inside the government? And what other countries may be assisting, since the U.S. is not directly engaging?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The international community recognizes this. If you look at key operative paragraphs of UN Security Council Resolution 2085, you will see in there a strong demand by the international community that a roadmap and a timetable be put in place for the return of the current government to civilian and constitutional rule through elections.

We're not the only ones who are pushing this. I believe that many in the European community and many in Africa also strongly support this. The statements by ECOWAS leaders, statements by the European leaders, and even the statements by some of the French authorities have all made reference to the need to move the country back onto a positive democratic trajectory.

This is absolutely essential as the security progress moves forward. You must have a credible government in Mali in order to prevent a recurrence of instability after stability has been restored.

QUESTION: Are there other nations, other regions that might be able to act as brokers to try to bring about this political reconciliation? I mean, particularly since the --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: There are. Let me just say, I think that we have seen the government of Blaise Compaore and Burkina Faso trying to host reconciliation talks between the Tuareg and the government in Bamako. We've seen discussions being held by the Algerians with the Tuareg all designed to help bring about reconciliation and a response to some of the unmet political grievances of northern groups.