

Terror attack at Mali hotel kills at least 19 people

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Soldiers on patrol outside the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali, Nov. 21, 2015. Photo: AP/Jerome Delay

BAMAKO, Mali — Islamic extremists armed with guns and grenades stormed the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital Bamako on Friday. In response, soldiers swarmed in to free guests floor by floor. As evening fell, officials said no more people were being held and that at least 19 people had been killed.

U.S. and French special operations forces assisted Malian troops in responding to the attack. Shooting continued into the late afternoon, and a U.N. official said two attackers were dead.

An Islamic extremist group known as the Mourabitounes claimed responsibility for the siege. The group is led by former al-Qaida commander Moktar Belmoktar. Al-Qaida carried out the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York.

The group said it wants its captured fighters freed from Mali's prisons. It also demanded an end to attacks against parts of northern Mali where Islamic rebels are based.

Many Believe Attack Was On French Interests

Mali is a former French colony, which only became fully independent of France in 1960. Since then, France has remained involved in the region. For that reason, many in France saw Friday's events as an assault on their country's interests. The incident was doubly shocking as it came only a week after a deadly terrorist attack in Paris, which killed 129 and wounded hundreds.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said 19 people died during the siege of the Radisson Blu. Eighteen of the dead were in the hotel and one Malian soldier was killed in the fighting.

It is still not clear how many fighters took part in the attack.

After the hotel was seized by Mourabitounes, people near the hotel ran for their lives. Troops in full combat gear quickly arrived on the scene and guided people to safety. Later, local TV showed heavily armed troops in what appeared to be a lobby, apparently led by an officer.

Malian special forces went floor by floor to free people, Malian army Commander Modibo Nama Traore said.

U.S. Special Forces Helped Malian Troops

U.S. special forces assisted the Malian troops, said Colonel Mark Cheadle of the U.S. Army's Africa Command. At least six Americans were evacuated from the hotel, although it was unclear how many were inside, he added.

About 40 French special police forces played a support role. The French Defense Ministry said its troops arrived in Bamako to support Malian forces.

About 170 guests and employees were taken prisoner early Friday. Some apparently managed to escape or hid in the sprawling hotel, which has 190 rooms.

"The intention was clearly to kill," said U.N. Mission spokesman Olivier Salgado.

The guests included visitors from France, Belgium, Germany, China, India, Canada, Ivory Coast and Turkey. Nonetheless, the attack was seen by many in France, particularly in the government, as a new attack on French interests.

French Intervened In 2013

In 2013, France launched a military operation against Islamic extremists who were then holding the northern half of Mali. The operation was the first of several foreign interventions that President Francois Hollande has launched. Those interventions have prompted increased threats against France and French interests from Islamic extremist groups.

"This could be a strike at important French interests," said Jens David Ohlin, an international law expert. "The French government invested so much military energy in pushing the Islamic rebels out of Mali."

President Hollande quickly weighed in on the attack. "We should yet again stand firm and show our solidarity with a friendly country, Mali," he said.

U.S. President Barack Obama said he was monitoring the situation.

Attackers Used Guns, Grenades

The gunmen had stormed the hotel shouting "God is great" in Arabic before firing on the guards, Traore said. An employee named Tamba Diarra said the attackers used grenades.

Ambulances rushed to the hotel and a military helicopter flew overhead during the siege.

Monique Kouame Affoue Ekonde, from Ivory Coast, said she was escorted out by soldiers as the gunmen rushed toward the fifth or sixth floor. She said six other people, including a Turkish woman, were with her.

She added that she was "in a state of shock."

Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders said four Belgians had been registered at the hotel.

Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said around 10 Chinese citizens took shelter in their rooms, and that all were safe. All are employees of Chinese companies working in Mali.

Also reported safe were 12 members of an Air France flight crew and five from Turkish Airlines. All 20 guests from India were safely evacuated as well, said Vikas Swarup, spokesman for India's Foreign Ministry.

United Nations Sent Reinforcements, Aid

The U.N. mission sent military reinforcements and medical aid to the scene, said another U.N. spokesman, Farhan Haq. He said the United Nations had a few staff members in the hotel but they were all safely out.

Northern Mali remains unstable and terrorist attacks have extended farther south this year, including the capital. In March masked gunmen shot up a restaurant in Bamako that is popular with foreigners, killing five people.

France has 3,500 troops operating in Mali and four other countries in the Sahel region of Africa as part of a counterterrorism operation. The ministry did not say how many soldiers were sent to Bamako.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence BEST explains why some people interpret this attack as a strike against France?
- (A) Mali is a former French colony, which only became fully independent of France in 1960. Since then, France has remained involved in the region.
 - (B) The incident was doubly shocking as it came only a week after a deadly terrorist attack in Paris, which killed 129 and wounded hundreds.
 - (C) French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said 19 people died during the siege of the Radisson Blu.
 - (D) President Hollande quickly weighed in on the attack. "We should yet again stand firm and show our solidarity with a friendly country, Mali," he said.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] that BEST supports the idea that these attackers are connected to other extremist groups.
- 3 Read the following sentence.

In 2013, France launched a military operation against Islamic extremists who were then holding the northern half of Mali. The operation was the first of several foreign interventions that President Francois Hollande has launched.

The author uses the word "interventions" to mean:

- (A) actions to change a situation
- (B) actions by a large group of people
- (C) actions that will honor a leader
- (D) actions by a foreign government

- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Many Believe Attack Was On French Interests."

Mali is a former French colony, which only became fully independent of France in 1960.

How does the word "only" affect the meaning of the sentence above?

- (A) It highlights that Mali is a very different country than France.
- (B) It highlights the unjust nature of France's rule over Mali.
- (C) It emphasizes that Mali was under French rule for a long time.
- (D) It emphasizes that the people of Mali easily won their independence.