

Hollande's flying visit to Mali

SAVARE, MALI: President Francois Hollande arrived in Mali on Saturday (2 February) as French-led troops worked to secure the last Islamist stronghold in the north after a lightning offensive against the extremists.

Hollande, whose surprise decision to intervene in Mali three weeks ago has won broad support in France, was there to thank French troops who have pushed back the radicals from the north. The French troops will soon be replaced African forces.

"I am going to Mali to express to our soldiers all our support, encouragement and pride," he said a day before his visit.

"I'm also going to ensure that African forces come and join us as quickly as possible and to tell them we need them for this international force."

Mali's interim president Dioncounda Traore met Hollande as he flew in to the central town of Savare accompanied by his foreign, defence and development ministers.

The two men were to hold a working lunch later in the day in the capital Bamako.

In Timbuktu, Hollande is due to meet with troops and visit the 700-year-old mud mosque of Djingareyber and the Ahmed Baba library, where Islamists burned priceless ancient manuscripts before fleeing. The trip comes as troops are poised to secure the sandy northeastern outpost of Kidal, the rebels' last bastion.

A first contingent of Chadian troops has now entered the town, a Malian security source said, and French soldiers are stationed at the airport, which they captured last week. The French-led campaign, provoked by a southward rebel advance that sparked fears the entire country could become a haven for Al-Qaeda-linked radicals, has claimed a rapid succession of victories in key Islamist strongholds.

But the joy of citizens throwing off the yoke of brutal Islamist rule, under which they were denied music and television and threatened with whippings, amputations and execution, has been accompanied by a grim backlash against light-skinned citizens seen as supporters of the Al Qaeda-linked radicals.

Rights groups have reported summary executions by both the Malian army and the Islamists, who capitalised on the chaos unleashed by a March coup to seize part of the country. Human Rights Watch said Islamists were implicated in the execution of at least seven Malian soldiers, slitting their throats or shooting them in the mouth.

It also said Malian troops had shot at least 13 suspected Islamist supporters in Savare and dumped them into wells, a report

corroborated by other rights groups. The Malian army has denied any crimes by its forces.

Mali's military was routed at the hands of rebel groups in the north, whose members are mostly light-skinned Tuaregs and Arabs, before the French army came to their aid. With fears of reprisal attacks high, many Arabs and Tuaregs have fled into the desert hills around Kidal.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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