

French Warplanes Bomb Islamists in Mali

French troops have launched a military operation in Mali, aiming at stopping the advance of Islamists from their bases in the north to the South.

The French intervention started on Friday, Jan. 11 with air strikes, and had enabled the Malian troops to regain control of the central town of Konna, occupied by Islamists the day before.

Since then, French warplanes have been bombing Islamists' positions in Timbuktu, Gao and elsewhere in the North.

More than half of Mali has been controlled by rebel groups, some with links to **al-Qaida**, since April 2012.

The French military intervention has been widely welcomed by Malians. In Bamako, the capital, residents have been expressing their joy, and are praising France for its support. The military action has raised hopes of liberating the North from the Islamists' occupation.

Until recently Mali has been a typical West African state with a mostly moderate form of Islam. It is constitutionally secular, and political parties with religious connotations are banned, though a high percentage of the population is Muslim. The cohabitation with the religious minorities, mostly Christians and animists, had been peaceful.

Christians had enjoyed widespread freedoms in Malian society, including foreign Christian missionaries, who also were in the North. But situation dramatically changed with the 2012 capture of the northern part of the country by Tuareg

separatist rebels and Islamist fighters.

The insurgents soon established an Islamic state in the North, with a strict regime of Sharia, or Islamic law. They attacked and destroyed churches and other Christian buildings in Timbuktu and Gao, with the aim of eradicating all traces of Christianity in the region.

They also were very hard on less fundamentalist Muslims, killing people, amputating limbs and destroying Sufi Muslim sanctuaries.

The harsh conditions prompted thousands to flee. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, more than 250,000 Malians currently live in neighbouring countries like Niger, Burkina Faso or Mauritania, and about 200,000 others have fled to Bamako.

The rapid Islamist takeover of the North pushed Mali into the No. 7 position on the 2013 World Watch List, a ranking of the 50 countries where conditions for Christians are most oppressive. It is published annually by Open Doors International, a ministry to persecuted Christians. Mali had never before been included in the list.

Among other initiatives, a crisis committee has been set up by a group of churches and missions in Bamako, to help an estimated minimum of 330 Christian refugee families who've fled there from the North. It's helping refugees with food, shelter and medical care, as well as long-term educational and vocational support.

Many of the displaced Christians living in Bamako are anxious because they don't know whether some of their family members are alive or dead.

"I gave my life to Christ two years ago but all members of my

family are Muslims, which is why my wife and daughter despise me,” said Mohamed Habi, a refugee. “When the Islamists captured Timbuktu and began their search for Christians to kill, I escaped to Mauritania. From Mauritania I went to Bamako to be with fellow Christians.”

French military strikes have paved the way for the deployment of an international military mission.

Many West African countries have announced their intention to send troops to Mali. More than 3,000 troops are expected in the following days, as part of the Military Mission for the Stabilization of Mali, backed by the UN, with logistical support from some Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States.

But the fight for the control of northern Mali will not be an easy task, French military experts are warning.

French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said France’s campaign in Mali is “developing favourably”. But he admitted that the situation is “difficult” and the Islamist fighters are well-armed.

According to an analyst, if the international forces fail to drive away the Islamists from northern Mali, there will be no hope rebuilding a Christian presence in the North again. The church in the South, too, is wary of the rising influence of Islam in Malian politics.