France to end military presence in Niger

BY ANGELA CHARLTON

PARIS — President Emmanuel Macron announced Sunday that France will end its military presence in Niger and pull its ambassador out of the country after its democratically elected president was deposed in a coup.

The announcement is a significant, if predicted, blow to France's policy in Africa, after French troops pulled out of neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso in recent years following coups there. France had stationed thousands of troops in the Sahel region at the request of African leaders to fight jihadist groups.

France has maintained some 1,500 troops in Niger since the July coup, and had repeatedly refused an order by the new junta for its ambassador to leave, saying that France didn't recognize the coup leaders as legitimate.

Tensions between France and Niger, a former French colony, have mounted in recent weeks, and Macron said recently that diplomats were surviving on military rations as they holed up in the embassy.

In an interview with France-2 television, Macron said that he spoke Sunday to ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, and told him that "France has decided to bring back its ambassador, and in the coming hours our ambassador and several diplomats will return to France."

He added, "And we will put an end to our military cooperation with the Niger authorities because they don't want to fight against terrorism anymore."

He said the troops would be gradually pulled out, likely by the end of the year, in coordination with the coup leaders ''because we want it to take place peacefully."

He said France's military presence was in response to a request from Niger's government at the time. That military cooperation between France and Niger had been suspended since the coup, however. The junta leaders claimed that Bazoum's government wasn't doing enough to protect the country from the insurgency.

The junta is now under sanctions by Western and regional African powers.

The junta in August gave French Ambassador Sylvain Itte 48 hours to leave. After the deadline expired without France recalling him, the coup leaders then revoked his diplomatic immunity.

In New York on Friday, the military government that seized power in Niger accused UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres of "obstructing" the West African nation's full participation at the UN's annual meeting of world leaders in order to appease France and its allies.

Experts say that after repeated military interventions in its former colonies in recent decades, the era of France as Africa's "gendarme" may finally be over, as the continent's priorities shift.

Andrew Lebovich, a research fellow with the Clingendael Institute, a think tank, said the decision marks both an acceptance of a "harsh reality for France in the region and may possibly put some limits on the U.S. deployments in Niger, though as we have seen the U.S. and France have not followed exactly the same positionings in Niger."

Rida Lyammouri, a senior fellow at the Policy Centre for the New South, a Morocco-based think tank, said Niger will feel the loss of French support in its fight against violent extremist organizations.

"France has been a reliable partner providing support to its operations and Niger simply doesn't have an alternative to fill this void by the French, at least in short and mid term," Lyammouri said.

Macron last year withdrew French troops from Mali following tensions with the ruling junta after a 2020 coup, and more recently from Burkina Faso, for similar reasons. Both African countries had asked for the French forces to leave.

France also suspended military operations with Central African Republic, accusing its government of failing to stop a "massive" anti-French disinformation campaign.

» The Associated Press



A Palestinian archaeologist removes the sand from a skeleton in a grave at the Roman cemetery in Jebaliya northern Gaza Strip on Saturday. The ancient cemetery was uncovered last year during construction of a housing project. Researchers have uncovered 135 graves, including two sarcophagi made of lead. *(The Associated Press)*

Ancient cemetery unearthed in Gaza

BY ISSAM ADWAN

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Palestinian workers in the Gaza Strip have found dozens of ancient graves, including two sarcophagi made of lead, in a Roman-era cemetery — a site dating back some 2,000 years that archaeologists describe as the largest cemetery discovered in Gaza.

Workers came upon the site last year during the construction of an Egyptian-funded housing project near Jabaliya, in the northern Gaza Strip. Since then, crews have worked to excavate the 2,700-square-metre site with the support of French experts.

Now, what was once an inconspicuous construction lot — surrounded by a grove of nondescript apartment buildings — has become a gold mine for archaeologists looking to understand more about the Gaza Strip.

Gaza, a coastal enclave home to some 2.3 million people, has a rich history stemming from its location on ancient trade routes between Egypt and the Levant. But a number of factors — Israeli occupation, Hamas' 16-year takeover of the territory and rapid urban growth — have conspired to endanger many of the besieged strip's archaeological treasures.

Against this backdrop, the discovery of 60 graves at the site in January marked a major finding, archaeologists say. That number has swelled to 135.

Rene Elter, a French archaeologist leading the dig, said researchers have studied over 100 of the graves.

"All of these tombs have almost already been excavated and have revealed a huge amount of information about the cultural material and also about the state of health of the population and the pathologies from which this population may have suffered," said Elter, the head of archaeology for "Intiqal," a program managed by the French nonprofit Première Urgence Internationale.

Elter pointed to the sarcophagi made of lead — one featuring ornate grape leaves, the other with images of dolphins — as exceptional finds.

"The discovery of lead sarcophagi here is a first for Gaza," he said.

Given the rarity of the lead tombs, Palestinian archaeologists like Fadel Al-Otul suspect that social elites are buried there. Al-Otul said the cemetery probably used to be located in a city — Romans used to place cemeteries near city centres.

Alongside the sarcophagi, Elter's team is restoring unearthed skeletons and piecing together shards of clay jars.

The skeletons discovered at the site will be sent out of Gaza for additional analysis, according to Al-Otul. The remains are set to return to the Hamas-led Ministry of Antiquities and Tourism.

Elter said the territory needs a dedicated team to oversee archaeological activity in Gaza.

"The Gazans deserve to tell their stories," he said. "Gaza boasts a plethora of potential archaeological sites, but monitoring each one, given the rapid pace of development, is no small feat."

» The Associated Press

Migrants hoping to reach U.S. travel by train

BY MEGAN JANETSKY

IRAPUATO, Mexico — As a train roared in the distance, some 5,000 mostly Venezuelan migrants hoping to make it to the U.S. snapped into action.

Families with young children sleeping on top of cardboard boxes and young men and women tucked away in tents under a nearby bridge scrambled to pack their things. After the train arrived on the outskirts of the central Mexican city of Irapuato, some swung their bodies over its metal trailers with ease, while others tossed up bags and handed up their small children swaddled in winter coats.

"Come up, come up," migrants atop the train urged those below. Others yelled, "God bless Mexico!"

After three days of waiting for the train that many in the group worried would never come, this was their ticket north to Mexico's border with the United States.

Thousands of other migrants were stranded in other parts of the country last week after Mexico's biggest railroad said it halted 60 freight trains. The company, Ferromex, said so many migrants were hitching rides on the trains that it became unsafe to move the trains. The company said it had seen a "half dozen regrettable cases of injuries or deaths" in a span of just days.

Despite violence from drug cartels and the dangers that come with riding atop the train cars, such freight trains — known collectively as "The Beast" — have long been used by migrants to travel north. The closures temporarily cut off one of the most transited migratory routes in the country at a time of surging migration, and left families like Mayela Villegas' in limbo.

Villegas, her partner and their six children had spent three days sleeping on the concrete ground surrounded by masses of other migrants. Before boarding the train, the Venezuelan family said they had packed food for only a few days of train rides and struggled to feed their kids.

"The more days we are here, the less food we have. Thankfully people here have helped us, have given us bread," Villegas said. "We're sleeping here because we don't have anything to pay for a room or hotel. We don't have the funds."

The halting of the train routes also underscores the historic numbers of people heading north in search of a new life in the United States, and the dilemma it poses for countries across the Americas as they struggle to cope with the sheer quantities of migrants traversing their territories.

In August, the U.S. Border Patrol made 181,509 arrests at the Mexican border, up 37 per cent from July but little changed from August 2022 and well below the high of more than 220,000 in December, according to figures released Friday.

It reversed a plunge in the numbers after new asylum restrictions were introduced in May. That comes after years of steadily rising migration levels produced by economic crisis and political and social turmoil in many of the countries people are fleeing.

Marta Ponce, a 73-year-old who has spent more than a decade providing aid to those who travel the tracks running through her town says migrants come from all over. Ponce noted that Venezuelan migrants fleeing economic crisis in their country are in the overwhelming majority, but she's seen people from around the world, including African nations, Russia and Ukraine.

Most travel through the Darien Gap, a days-long trek across the rugged Colombia-Panama border. The crossing was once so dangerous that few dared to attempt it, but now so many migrants flood through its dense jungles that it's rapidly become a migratory highway similar to the trains winding through Mexico.

Crossings of the Darien Gap have shot up so much they could approach 500,000 people this year alone.

Villegas, whose family spent three days in Irapuato waiting for the train, was among many who saw the Darien Gap as an opportunity. The family was among 7.7 million people to leave Venezuela in recent years, and spent three years in neighbouring Colombia.

The family was able to set up a small barbershop business on the fringes of Colombia's capital, but rising xenophobia and low pay left the family of eight struggling to scrape by.

This summer, when a gang threatened them for not paying extortion money, Villegas and her partner, 32-year-old Yorver Liendo, decided it was time to go to the U.S. For them, the dangers are worth it if it means a change for their children, who ate yogurt out of plastic bottles and snuggled together on the ground.

"It's the country of a thousand opportunities, and at least my kids are still small. They can keep studying, and have a better quality of life," Liendo said.

» The Associated Press

Pope blames weapons industry for Russia-Ukraine war

BY NICOLE WINFIELD

Pope Francis on Saturday labeled the weapons industry as being a key driver of the "martyrdom" of Ukraine's people in Russia's war, saying even the withholding of weapons now is going to continue their misery.

Francis appeared to refer to Poland's recent announcement that it is no longer sending arms to Ukraine when he was asked about the war during brief remarks to reporters while returning home from Marseille, France.

Francis acknowledged he was frustrated that the Vatican's diplomatic initiatives hadn't borne much fruit. But he said behind the Russia-Ukraine conflict was also the weapons industry.

He described the paradox that was keeping Ukraine a "martyred people" — that at first many countries gave Ukraine weapons and now are taking them away. Francis has long denounced the weapons industry as "merchants of death," but he has also asserted the right of countries to defend themselves.

"I've seen now that some countries are pulling back, and aren't giving weapons," he said.

"This will start a process where the martyrdom is the Ukrainian people, certainly. And this is bad." It was an apparent reference to the announcement by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawieck that Poland was no longer sending arms to Ukraine as part of a trade dispute.

"We cannot play with the martyrdom of the Ukrainian people," Francis said. "We have to help resolve things in ways that are possible."

"Not to make illusions that tomorrow the two leaders will go out together to eat, but to do whatever is possible," he said.

In other comments, Francis spoke about his two-day visit to Marseille, where he exhorted Europe to be more welcoming to migrants.

Francis said he was heartened that there is greater consciousness about the plight of migrants 10 years after he made his first trip as pope to the Italian island of Lampedusa, ground zero in Europe's migrant debate. But he said the "reign of terror" they endure at the hands of smugglers hasn't gotten any better.

Francis recalled that when he became pope, "I didn't even know where Lampedusa was." The Sicilian island, which is closer to Africa than the Italian mainland, is the destination of choice for migrant smugglers and has seen frequent shipwrecks off its shores. Last week, the island was overwhelmed when nearly 7,000 migrants arrived in one day, more than the resident population.

Francis, who was elected pope in 2013, said he had heard some stories about the problems on Lampedusa in his first months as pope "and in prayer I heard 'You need to go there.'"

The visit has come to epitomize the importance of the migrant issue for Francis, who has gone on to make some memorable gestures of solidarity, including in 2016 when he brought back a dozen Syrian Muslim migrants on his plane after visiting a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece.

» The Associated Press