

UN Says Unmanned Drones Will Be Deployed in Mali

Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press

United Nations (AP) — The U.N. peacekeeping force in Mali will be getting unmanned drones to help protect civilians and U.N. troops in the volatile north, the peacekeeping chief said Wednesday.

Herve Ladsous told the U.N. Security Council that the unmanned aerial vehicles will provide critical information for peacekeepers.

The U.N. is already using unmanned drones in its peacekeeping operation in Congo, and Ladsous said last month that he would like to deploy drones in countries like Mali, Central African Republic and South Sudan.

Mali's Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop told reporters after the council meeting that the drones are not yet in service but the government would like them "as soon as possible."

Northern Mali fell under control of ethnic Tuareg separatists and then al-Qaida-linked Islamic extremists following a military coup in 2012. A French-led intervention last year scattered the extremists, but the Tuaregs have pushed back against the authority of the Bamako-based government.

Tensions escalated sharply last month when Mali's newly named Prime Minister Moussa Mara visited the key northern town of Kidal for the first time. Tuareg rebels launched an assault on government buildings, killing eight soldiers, six local government officials and two others in what the government described as a "declaration of war."

An uneasy cease-fire was mediated by the African Union but Ladsous said "armed groups have now assumed effective military and, to an extent, administrative control over Kidal and other northern towns."

"The tragic fighting in Kidal and its aftermath and the general insecurity caused by the persisting presence of terrorist groups across northern Mali highlight that much remains to be done to achieve stability" in the country, he said.

"A successful political process is the cornerstone of this stability," Ladsous added. "The status quo cannot stand: progress in the political process is urgent."

Bert Koenders, the U.N. special envoy for Mali, told reporters that "the main message from all of us was the need to immediately start peace negotiations without delay."

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The Security Council authorized a U.N. force of 11,200 military personnel and 1,440 police for Mali last year, but as of May 26 its strength was significantly lower — 8,280 military personnel and 979 police.

Ladsous said by the end of the month the force will reach 77 percent of its military strength and 83 percent of its police strength.

He said combat helicopters capable of supporting long-range patrols and deterrent action over a wide area have already been deployed but the mission needs utility and armed helicopters.

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