

U.S. Air Force launches surveillance flights in newly-built airfield in Niger



Niamey, August 19 (RHC)-- The U.S. Air Force has launched flying operations from a recently constructed remote air base in the West African country of Niger in efforts to carry out intelligence gathering missions over the impoverished region.

"This joint-use runway allows for a better response to regional security requirements and provides strategic access and flexibility," said commander of US Air Forces in Europe-Air forces Africa (USAFE-AFAFRICA), Gen. Jeff Harrigan stated a report by the U.S.-based Stars and Stripes military news outlet.

"Air Base 201 gives Niger and the U.S. incredible capability in a challenging region of the world," Harrigan added, referring to the 6,200-foot runway built by American forces in the southern Sahara Desert in Niger. The USAFE-AFAFRICA commander further praised the American troops for completing the largest-ever, airmen-led construction project in Air Force history.

According to the report, Niger's government granted authority to the US military for conducting armed drone flights over the country back in 2018, shortly after the ambush killing of four American soldiers in the country by alleged ISIL-linked militants in October 2017.

Citing a USAFE-AFAFRICA spokesman, the report further noted that construction on Niger's Air Base 201 is still continuing, with full flying operations expected to begin later this year.

Air Force C-130 cargo planes and other aircraft on resupply missions, in coordination with the Nigerien air force and the country's civil aviation authorities, began flying limited Visual Flight Rule (VFR) operations into and out of the air base on August 1, added a USAFE-AFAFRICA statement as cited in the report.

It further noted that VFR operations are conducted without instruments to assess an airfield before full flight operations begin, including drone missions.

The report also cited the U.S. Air Force as saying that the \$110-million airfield in Niger "is the most austere location from which the Air Force has attempted to operate," noting that it was finished earlier this summer following delays caused by the challenges of working in a remote desert, "including sandstorms, locust swarms and difficulties in transporting supplies to the base in central Niger."

U.S. Africa Command says several militant groups operate in border area between Niger, Nigeria and Chad, including ISIL in West Africa, which has emerged as a priority for the American forces in the region.

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