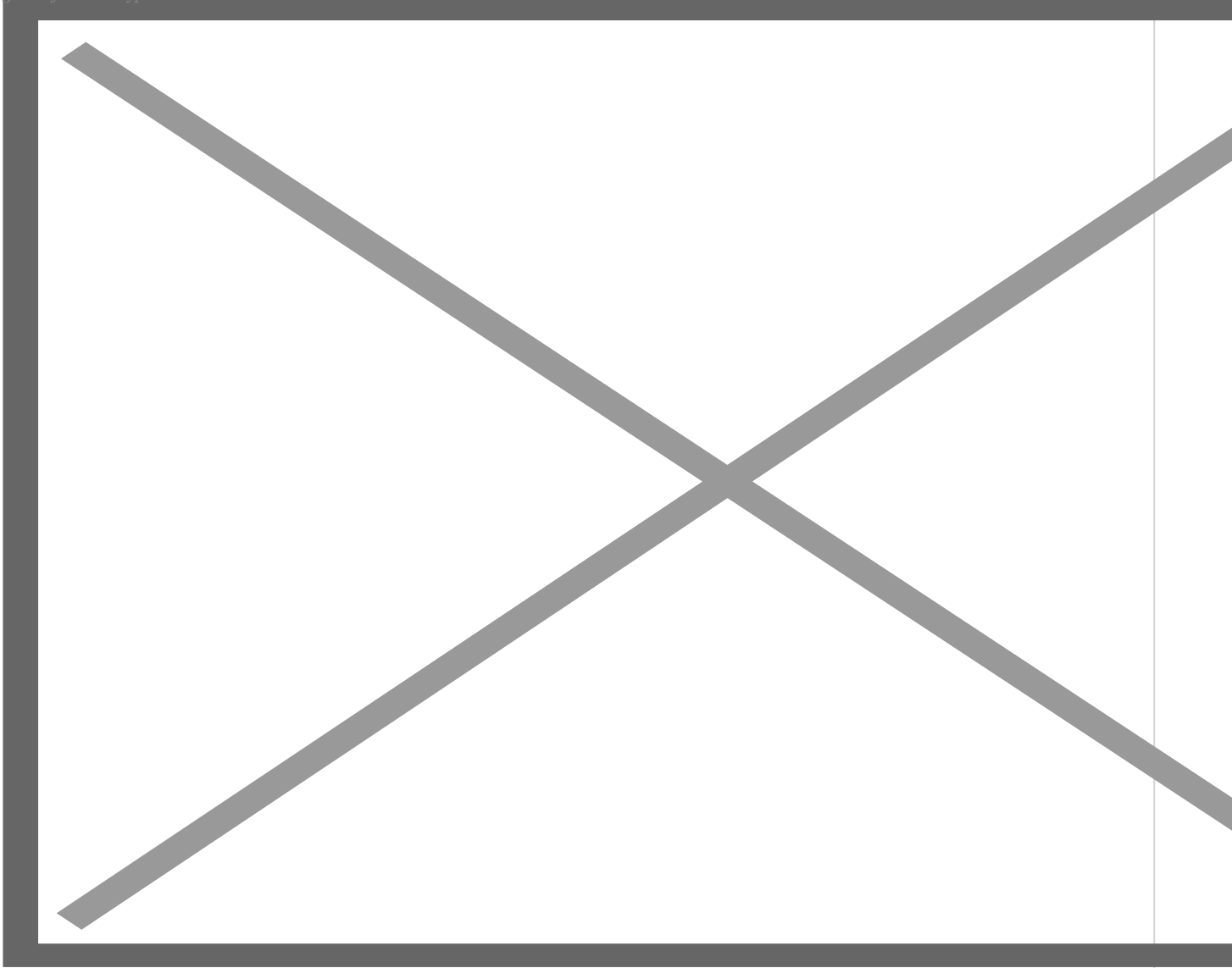


Mali summons French ambassador over President Macron's criticism

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Last month, it emerged that Mali's ruling military was close to hiring 1,000 paramilitaries from Russian private-security firm Wagner, which incensed France [Amadou Keita/Reuters]

Paris, October 6 (RHC)-- Mali has summoned France's ambassador to the country to register its "indignation" at French President Emmanuel Macron's recent criticism of the country's government, which is dominated by army figures.

Tensions between France and its former colony Mali have been high since it emerged that the Sahel state is in talks with Russian mercenaries. These frustrations were on full display at the UN General Assembly last month, when Choguel Kokalla Maiga, Mali's interim prime minister, accused France of a "sort of abandonment in full flight" over its decision to reduce its military deployment in the semi-arid Sahel region.

Macron later told French media that Maiga's comments were "unacceptable" and suggested that Mali's government was "not even really one" – because of the coup in Mali led by Colonel Assimi Goita in May.

The war of words continued on Tuesday when Macron called on Mali's ruling military to restore state authority in large areas of the country abandoned in the face of the armed uprising. "It's not the role of the French army to fill in for the 'non-work', if I may describe it, of the Malian state," he told French media.

Later on Tuesday, Mali's foreign ministry said that Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop had summoned France's ambassador to inform him of the Malian government's "indignation and disapproval" of Macron's comments. "The minister called on the French authorities to show restraint, avoiding value judgements," the statement said, adding that Mali wanted a "constructive approach based on mutual respect."

France intervened in Mali in 2013 after armed rebels seized control of the north the previous year. Since then, Paris has deployed thousands of troops across the Sahel region to combat the armed uprising.

Despite its military presence, violence has spread to central Mali and to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

In Mali, thousands of people have died and hundreds of thousands have been displaced, while swathes of the country have little or no state presence. In June, France decided to scale back its Sahel deployment considerably following a military takeover in Mali in August 2020, which forced out the elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Colonel Assimi Goita, who led the August coup, installed a civilian-led interim government. But he then deposed the leaders of that government this May in a second coup. Last month, it emerged that Mali's ruling military was close to hiring 1,000 paramilitaries from Russian private-security firm Wagner, which incensed France.

The French government has stated that despite its planned troop withdrawal, it remains militarily committed to the fight against the armed uprising in the Sahel.

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