

# France wants Mali UN force in place by April

PARIS: France wants a United Nations peacekeeping force to be in place in Mali by April, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said on Wednesday, 6 February 2013.

"Once the security [is] assured, we can envisage without changing the structures that it can be placed under the framework of UN peacekeeping operations," the French top diplomat said.

"That does not mean that we will leave Mali, but we can reduce the number of our troops and focus particularly on finding terrorists."

Asked if a possible deployment of a UN peacekeeping force was scheduled in April, Fabius said: "Yes. Our experts and collaborators are working in that perspective."

Fabius also reiterated France's refusal to stay for a long time in the West African country and the need for a swift African forces deployment to take over from French troops, which helped local authorities to retake strategic towns and inflict heavy losses on al Qaeda-affiliated insurgents during the three-week military operation.

Earlier on Wednesday, Fabius said France would start to withdraw its troops from Mali in March.

"We will continue to act in the north where some terrorist havens remain. I think that from March, if everything goes according to plan, the number of French troops should decrease," the top diplomat told the free daily Metro.

After the UN Security Council talks on Mali, French Ambassador to the UN, Gerard Araud, on Wednesday called on the Security Council to deploy an international peacekeeping operation in Mali to take over from French forces.

French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on Tuesday also ruled out a long-term deployment of French troops in Mali following positive progress made during France's military intervention against Islamist rebels.

During his one-day visit to Mali last Saturday, French President Francois Hollande stressed that French soldiers would return home once the conflict-torn state has restored sovereignty and a UN-backed African military force could take over from the French soldiers.

At the request of Malian President Dioncounda Traore, France has already poured 3 500 soldiers into the West African country and carried out airstrikes since January 11 in the rebel-held northern half of Mali.

On Monday, visiting US Vice President Joe Biden said France and the United States have agreed "on the need to as

quickly as reasonably possible establish the African-led international mission in Mali and as quickly as is prudent transition that mission to the United Nations".

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