

US\$950m to keep troops in Mali

ABIDJAN, COTE D'IVOIRE: West African nations will need aid worth US\$950m to sustain and reinforce a military mission to help fight Islamists in Mali, Ivory Coast's Foreign Minister Charles Koffi Diby said Monday (25 February).

The amount is twice that of funds pledged by donor nations to the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to help bring a multinational African military force of up to 8,000 troops being deployed in the strife-torn country.

Diby announced at the start of a meeting of foreign ministers in ECOWAS, which is currently chaired by Ivory Coast, that the sum he had in mind took into account "the demands of an asymmetrical war or a drawn-out conflict that the *narco-terrorists* could bring about," allowing for west African troop rotations.

This brings "the overall financial estimate to US\$950m," Diby said, without going into any further details. At the end of January, the international community promised during a conference in Addis Ababa to provide an overall sum of more than US\$455m for the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) that ECOWAS is putting together, for the Malian army and for humanitarian aid.

At the moment, 6,000 soldiers are due to be deployed as part of AFISMA, as well as 2,000 Chadian troops pledged by N'Djamena, who would not be part of the Nigerian-led force but would co-ordinate with it.

"It is vital that AFISMA, which should eventually enable the progressive replacement" of French troops who intervened against the armed extremists in January should dispose of all the necessary resources," Diby said.

He added that it was also a priority to "protect the Tuareg population against all kinds of abuses".

The light-skinned Tuareg and Arab communities, sometimes considered to be favourable to the Islamists who imposed strict Sharia law with harsh punishments on northern Mali, have in recent weeks been prey to serious human rights abuses. Witnesses and international non-governmental organisations blame many of these abuses on the Malian army.

The ministerial meeting in Abidjan precedes an ordinary summit of ECOWAS countries, due to be held in Ivory Coast's political capital Yamoussoukro this week.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge