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"Urgent: Belmokhtar claims responsibility for the suicide attacks in Niger and says they had come in revenge for the killing of Abouzeid"

Mokhtar Belmokhtar alias Khaled Aboulabbes, emir of the "veiled ones" [al mulaththamin] group, has claimed the responsibility of "Signed-in-Blood Battalion" under his command, in cooperation with the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa [MUJAO], for the suicides attacks that were carried out at dawn today Thursday in Niger.

In a statement he has released and a copy of which was sent to the Nouakchott news agency, Belmokhtar said that the operation that was carried out in Niger was called the "Abdelhamid Abouzeid conquest" [Ghazoua], a reference to Abouzeid who was killed in a French bombing operation [in Mali].

This is the first time that the armed Islamic groups in northern Mali officially admit that Abouzeid, leading Al-Qa'idah in the [Land of the] Islamic Maghreb [AQLIM] figure, has been killed.

The statement said that the operation that shook Niger at dawn today and targeted the Areva uranium extraction base which is guarded by French special troops, in Arlit , as the statement says, and the Niger army military base in Agadez, was carried out by the "signatories with blood" brigade and the MUJAO group.

Belmokhtar said in the statement that he has signed personally that the operation was "a good news for our dear Ummah [nation of Muslims everywhere] and one of the epics of Islam that has taken place at the home of the enemy; it was one of the conquests of the "signatories with blood" conducted in the name of the martyr commander - as we consider him - Abdelhamid Abouzeid, may God bless his soul, who was martyred under a bombing by the crusader French aircraft while leading the combat in person at the front line."

And as a reaction to the killing of Abouzeid, Belmokhtar said that "a unit of fedayin from various countries rose up, declared they were prepared to die, and put their signatures with their blood inside the citadels of an enemy whose army was one of the pillars of the crusader campaign against our Islamic land."

Belmokhtar added that the operation came also as a response to the recent statements made by the Niger president during his visit to France, adding: "This is our first response to the statement of the Niger president - from his masters in Paris - that jihad and mujahidin have been liquidated militarily; and, with help and strength from God, we will conduct more operations, and we will even transfer the battle to his country if he does not withdraw his mercenary army [from Mali]."

Belmokhtar further said that France, by its crusader campaign, as he put it, against Shari'ah, has won only "a media victory rather than a military one on the ground; this became clear from the first days of the war and it was just a falsification of reality; and God has left for it [France] what will bring harm to it, in store."

The emir of the "veiled ones" who split from the AQLIM organisation last year, defended the withdrawal of the armed group from towns in Azawad, saying that it was "a military option required by the war conditions and to spare the blood of Muslims." He added: "We will make you taste the heat of killing and injuries in your own homes, amid your troops; as you kill you will be killed, and as you bombard you will be bombarded; the more unjust is he who starts a fight."

Belmokhtar has stressed that the suicide cohorts of his group are "fully ready; they are watching their targets and waiting."

Belmokhtar concluded his statement by urging the armed Oumma to assume its lawful duties to bring back Islamic rule whose light has illuminated the Islamic Azawad, and to help its mujahidin sons who have been standing steadfast at its entries and defending its sanctities."

This is the first statement issued by Mokhtar Belmokhtar since President Driss Deby of Chad had declared that the French forces had been able to kill Belmokhtar in battles with Islamic armed men in the Adrar-Ifoghas Mountains. This information has been denied by a spokesman for the "veiled ones" brigade and the MUJAO in previous statements to the Nouakchott news agency.

In this context, Adnan Aboulwalid Assahraoui, chairman of the Shura [consultative] Council of the MUJAO today claimed his group's responsibility for the attacks in question, in statements to the France Press news agency, AFP.