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Christophe Boisbouvier, "Mali as a mere spectator"

It is Mauritania that stormed the Armed Islamists on 24 June. Bamako was informed only a few hours to the launch of the operation...on its own territory.

There was an explosion of mines, a firing of rockets... On 24 June, violent combats broke out in the Wagadou forest, a wooded savannah area - 80 km long and 40 km wide - located in the west of Mali, about 70 km from the Mauritanian border. Toward 5 o'clock in the evening, about 15 pick-up vehicles of the Special Intervention Group of the Mauritanian Army launched an attack on an entrenched camp of Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM].

The access points were packed with mines. Several vehicles were either blown up by the mines or hit by projectiles. Only five vehicles came out of the battle intact. According to Nouakchott, the death toll is 15 dead on the side of AQIM and two on the side of the Mauritanian Army. "As a matter of fact there have been more deaths on the side of the assailants," an expert on the sub-region affirms.

Eleven AQIM members - including "at least five sub-Saharan Blacks," reveals the Malian newspaper *Le Combat* - have also been captured by the Malian Army, which was sealing the zone. It is not the first time that the Mauritians have carried out a raid on AQIM on Malian territory.

On 22 July 2010, they acted hand in hand with the French, in a vain attempt to free French hostage Michel Germaneau. The death toll is 7 Islamists killed. On 17 September, they attacked alone an AQIM position close to the wells of Hassi Sidi, in the region of Timbuktu. There was an ambush by the Islamists and the operation was a flop. On an internet site AQIM published pictures of destroyed Mauritanian vehicles. Today, it is the Mauritians who are showing images: burned vehicles, the rest of unexploded explosive devices, fortifications with sand bags, trenches and burned trunks.

What is the obsessive fear of Nouakchott? A mole that has infiltrated the Malian security services.

Is it the sign that this time round the battle has turned to their advantage? In any case, they have remained masters on the ground.

In Mali, people are obviously beginning to gnash their teeth. "Why do the Mauritians enter and leave our territory as they please? Are we in the process of losing our sovereignty? Why is our army not combating?" Asked Tiebile Drame's National Renaissance Party.

In fact, in early June, the two armies were prepared to do battle together, but there were leaks in Bamako. Even the press announced an attack! The attack was therefore cancelled in extremis.

In order to beguile AQIM, Nouakchott's soldiers suspended action for several weeks. Then on 24 June, they carried out the attack alone. They informed their Malian counterparts only a few hours before the assault. The obsessive fear of the Mauritians is the mole who has infiltrated the Malian security services.

Ransoms. At the origin of Nouakchott's determination against AQIM is an act of extreme savagery. On 14 September 2008, a month after the putsch that brought to power General Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz, 11 Mauritanian soldiers and a guide were captured and beheaded by AQIM near Tourine. Since then, Nouakchott has been engaged in a fight to death with two AQIM emirs, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid and Yahya Abou Hammam. Both are Algerians.

The first is AQIM's head in the sub-region. The second is in charge of military operations against Mauritania. Two terrorist actions have been attributed to him: the kidnapping of an Italian-Burkinabe couple in the south of Mauritania in December 2009 and an attempted car bomb attacks in Nouakchott in February 2011.

In recent months, thanks to ransoms paid in exchange for hostages and as a result of the influx of new weapons from Libya, Yahya Abou Hamman has reinforced his position. He has decided to set up a base of about 50 men, half of whom are Mauritians, in the Wagadou forest. The advantage is that the site is closer to the urban areas than the other AQIM bases. It can easily receive young sub-Saharan recruits especially from Nigeria. The disadvantage is that the site is very far away from AQIM's traditional sanctuary at the confines of Mali and Algeria. It is difficult to keep for a long time a position that is so advanced to the south.

Satellite. It is with United States and French intelligence - satellite observations, films, wire-tapping, and radar detection - that AQIM's forces have been spotted. From a good source, Algerian services have been associated to preparations for the attack. In mid-June, President Ould Abdelaziz received Colonel Ramtane Benamara, of General Mohamed Mediene's all-powerful Intelligence and Security Department. The Algerian officer traveled to Nouakchott, and not to Bamako. This is a sure sign that the Malian services do not inspire the trust of anyone...

Have the AQIM Islamists suffered a setback? "Provisionally. One of their bases has perhaps been destroyed, but nothing indicates that they have been dislodged from the zone. The Mauritians have not yet finished with them," says a security adviser of a sahelian head of state. The greater part of AQIM troops - several hundred men - is elsewhere in the massive desert in the north of Mali. That is where the four French hostages kidnapped in Arlit, in the north of Niger on 16 September 2010, are being retained. It is in this area that they hide their most sophisticated weapons, confided a French intelligence specialist. The most important thing is to cut their supply lines."

On 12 June, two pick-up vehicles of weapon traffickers from Libya were intercepted close to Arlit. On board were 640 kg of explosives, including Czech Semtex, 435 detonators and delayed action fuses. These were enough to blow up

several strategic buildings in an African capital... Here is a commentary by our Sahelian adviser: "In June, we gained two points, but the enemy is tough."