



WEATHER IN THE SAHEL AND WEST AFRICA

**ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SAHEL
AND WEST AFRICA.**

WEEK 3 – MAY 2026

Mali : Alghabass Ag Intalla: the new ruler of Kidal?

Timbuktu Institute - Week 3 - may 2026

The town of Kidal, in northern Mali, has a new leader: [Alghabass Ag Intalla](#). Whilst the region is at the heart of tensions between the army and the rebels, this Tuareg leader has managed to establish himself by forming a team around him to run the town. To understand his strategy for controlling the situation, one must look at his 'inner circle', a strategic mix of people from very different backgrounds. Among those around him are traditional Tuareg leaders, former military personnel well-versed in the art of war, and figures close to jihadist movements. This highly complex alliance enables Alghabass Ag Intalla to maintain his authority on the ground whilst broadening his communication. The formation of this highly organised group around Kidal's new leader is bad news for the Malian government. It shows that the rebellion is organising and growing stronger, making it even more difficult for the government to retake this area.

The main roads: an obstacle course

[Road traffic](#) is currently facing its darkest hours. Lorries carrying various goods, foodstuffs and essential supplies are being blocked en route as soon as they attempt to enter the Malian capital. The pressure exerted by armed groups is becoming increasingly felt; and this strategy of imposing a blockade on such a scale is clearly intended to paralyse the heart of the country, undermining the national balance. The repeated attacks are causing concern among transport companies, which are being forced to turn their lorries back in order to minimise both human and material losses. The FAMA are responding by closely monitoring the movements of these groups and are determined to regain control of the already delicate situation. Breaking this blockade is essential to allow lorries to move freely and ensure the capital is resupplied.

When military operations have a severe impact on the civilian population

A new tragedy has struck the civilian population in central Mali. At least [ten civilians lost their lives](#) in drone strikes carried out by the Malian army, whilst they were travelling to celebrate a wedding . The attack struck public transport vehicles near the town of Amoustarat, located in the Gao region. According to accounts from relatives of the victims and local authorities, the death toll could rise as several of the injured are in a serious condition. Incidents of this kind involving the use of drones by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) occur regularly in this conflict zone, where the army is hunting down armed groups. While the military authorities defend the effectiveness of these tools in better targeting the enemy, human rights organisations are outraged by the rising number of civilian casualties. For the current regime, this latest tragedy further erodes the support of local populations in a region that is already extremely unstable.

Furthermore, it is noted that [the Malian army](#) is stepping up its offensives on the ground and achieving tactical successes in its fight against the terrorist groups destabilising the region. The major problem lies in the fact that this intensification of military operations is accompanied by a critical rise in reported attacks against local populations. This strategy is eroding the fragile trust that rural residents have in the defence and security forces. This climate of fear and injustice is highly likely to drive young people towards the recruitment networks of insurgent groups.

The AES faces the Malian crash test

The Alliance of Sahel States, comprising Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, is facing its first major crisis. Repeated attacks in northern and central Mali, particularly strikes that have hit civilians and the advance of rebels, are putting the SJF's solidarity to the test. Whilst the organisation was created in part to prove that the Sahel countries could secure the region without the help of foreign powers or the UN, the difficulty in securing Bamako is complicating the task. For Niger and Burkina Faso, the situation is becoming untenable. The three countries had promised to provide mutual military assistance, but the Malian government now appears overwhelmed on its own territory, which threatens the security situation of its neighbours. This crisis is forcing the leaders of the AES to review their defence strategy: either they succeed in coordinating a joint and effective military response to save Mali, or the alliance will suffer a blow that will complicate future cooperation.

Disagreements over Mali are straining relations between Algiers and Moscow

Relations between Algiers and Moscow are at breaking point. Traditionally allies, the two countries now display deep differences over the handling of the Malian crisis. Algeria views the growing influence of Russia and its military partners in Mali with great suspicion, a presence it considers destabilising for its own border security and which undermines its long-standing diplomatic efforts in the region. To demonstrate its dissatisfaction in a dramatic manner, Algiers has abandoned its usual neutrality. The Algerian ambassador to Ukraine visited the site of a Russian missile strike in Kyiv, openly describing the act as an attack. This strong diplomatic gesture is a direct message to the Kremlin: to protect its strategic interests in the Sahel, Algeria is prepared to jeopardise its alliance with its main arms supplier.

Consequences of the attacks : President Goïta consolidating power?

The military regime in power in Bamako has skilfully exploited the psychological and security shock caused by the 25 April attacks to strengthen its political control over the entire country. This major security crisis has been used to centralise all levers of national defence and public security in the hands of the transitional president. By taking full control of the military apparatus, President Assimi Goïta has succeeded in silencing the democratic opposition and stifling criticism from within the regime itself. This method of permanent governance would now rule out any prospect of a return to civilian rule or a democratic transition in the short term in Mali.

Fear of losing their land divides communities

The forced displacement of thousands of people and repeated waves of violence across the country are now fuelling deeply worrying local concerns about the potential loss of inhabited territories. This conflict in the Sahel, initially perceived as a purely security-related crisis against terrorism, is now taking an identity-based turn that is extremely dangerous for national unity. Residents of the affected regions sometimes perceive the army's operations not as a liberation, but as an attempt to exclude them from their ancestral lands, which makes national reconciliation difficult. This social divide weakens community alliances and stokes long-standing tensions that go beyond the simple framework of the war against the insurgents.

Russian ally accused of using banned weapons

Russian forces from the Africa Corps, official partners of the Bamako government, face very serious formal accusations regarding the widespread use of cluster munitions during air strikes on areas inhabited by civilians. For the Malian junta, the decision to authorise the use of these munitions, banned under international treaties, demonstrates a clear determination to eradicate the rebellion at any cost, without regard for the terrible human collateral damage. This use of banned weapons further isolates Malian diplomacy on the international stage whilst creating a lasting danger for the region's civilian populations. The debris from these bombs continues to threaten people long after the fighting has ceased, preventing farmers from returning to their fields.

Niger – The Garbougna attack: evidence of the army's weaknesses?

Timbuktu Institute – Week 3 – may 2026

The heavy human toll recorded during the violent attack on the Garbougna military base serves as a brutal reminder of the persistent vulnerability of the Nigerien army's positions. This tactical setback, which cost the lives of at least sixty professional soldiers, clearly demonstrates that armed groups retain a significant capacity for planning and coordination in the Sahel. The attackers are still managing to bypass the defensive systems put in place, thus demonstrating that the transitional government in Niamey is far from having achieved total control of the territory. This reality on the ground stands in stark contrast to the reassuring official rhetoric regarding the technological and logistical build-up of the national troops.

The border blockade : major operations

To address the deteriorating security situation and the fact that its borders are the scene of repeated attacks, the government of Niger has responded by opening two major new military fronts along the borders with Algeria and Chad. The strategic aim of this manoeuvre is to block the advance of mobile armed groups and to paralyse trafficking networks by permanently cutting off their traditional supply and retreat routes. By deploying special forces to these remote, hard-to-reach desert areas, Niger is seeking to reaffirm the state's sovereignty over its geographical peripheries and to reassure its regional partners in the face of the transnational threat.

The oil agreement with China: a new lease of life for the economy

The final signing of the new oil export agreement between Niger and China provides vital financial support for the economic survival of the military regime in Niamey, following more than a year of technical deadlocks and severe political tensions. By securing oil revenues through the Chinese state-owned company Beijing, the Nigerien government has finally obtained the funds needed to finance its heavy military campaign and pay for its cross-border military operations. This major trade agreement enables the military regime to effectively resist international financial isolation and withstand the economic pressures or sanctions imposed by certain traditional Western countries. Crude oil thus became Niger's main diplomatic weapon for preserving its political autonomy and consolidating its policy of breaking with the status quo in the sub-region.

Benin : In the spirit of continuity, Romuald Wadagni takes the helm

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He will be the fifth president elected since the advent of democratic renewal in 1990. On 24 May, at the presidential palace in Cotonou, Romuald Wadagni was officially sworn in as president, succeeding Patrice Talon after a decade in power. Elected on 12 April with over 94% of the vote against a minor opponent, his victory was a formality. At the age of 49, the former Minister of the Economy takes office for a seven-year renewable term. In his inauguration speech, Wadagni sought to emphasise the need to continue the projects launched by his predecessor, in a spirit of continuity. Nevertheless, he did not fail to stress the need to make economic growth tangible, a promise he had already made during his election campaign: “National growth only makes sense when it becomes visible in people’s everyday lives,” he acknowledged. In a country where the majority of the population is under twenty-five, the new president sought to be a bearer of hope: “To the young people of Benin who reject the old fatalism and want to succeed here at home through their own hard work, I want to say this: Benin believes in you and will give you the opportunities to succeed.”

Furthermore, two major challenges lie ahead. On the security front, the north of the country remains vulnerable to recurring jihadist attacks. On this point, Wadagni promises that “the state will stand firm against anything that threatens our cohesion and our security”. On the diplomatic front, the new president has shown a conciliatory stance by calling for “working together” with his regional neighbours – Niger and Burkina Faso in particular – who, incidentally, regularly accuse Cotonou of seeking to destabilise them. In an encouraging sign, Niger’s Prime Minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine was warmly welcomed, and the foreign ministers of Burkina Faso and Mali were also present at the ceremony. On another front, whilst Wadagni has pledged that “press freedom is among the priorities”, the state of civil and individual liberties will be one of the key areas to watch in the coming months, in a country where some were quick to highlight a shift towards authoritarianism under former President Talon. Finally, shortly after his inauguration, the new president appointed his first government, comprising 24 members, including several former ministers from the Talon era.

Over 90 kg of cocaine seized

At the heart of West Africa, which has become a hub for global maritime drug trafficking, Cotonou continues to play a key role. Between 16 and 17 May, Benin’s Special River and Maritime Police Unit seized over 90 kg of cocaine in the port of Cotonou. Officers discovered five bales of the substance concealed in the strainer of a foreign-flagged vessel during a surveillance operation in the harbour basin. Analyses confirmed the nature of the substances, which were handed over to the OCERTID (Central Office for the Suppression of Illicit Trafficking in Drugs and Precursors) for further investigation. Given the large quantity seized, this could be seen as evidence not only of the operational progress made by the security forces, but also and above all of the continuing scale of cocaine flows transiting through the Gulf of Guinea towards European markets. Given that the links and connections between criminal and jihadist networks have been established by numerous studies, this major seizure serves as a reminder of the scale of the security challenges facing the country’s new government.

Cameroon : National Unity Day, a mixed celebration?

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Since 1972, every 20 May, Cameroon has celebrated its National Unity Day. This commemorates the adoption by referendum in 1972 of a state uniting the English-speaking and French-speaking regions, thereby replacing the country's federal structure. The theme chosen this year was 'National unity, the pillar of our defence and the foundation of Cameroon's development'. As is customary, this grand national ceremony saw President Paul Biya preside over the military and civilian parade on Boulevard du 20 Mai in Yaoundé. However, beyond the pomp and ceremony, the National Unity Day celebrations appear to have painted a picture of Biya's Cameroon that is both contrasting and true to life. Indeed, several notable signs emerged. First and foremost, the ceremonial position of Franck Biya, the president's son, who was placed closer to his father than the Secretary-General of the Presidency, Ferdinand Ngoh Ngoh, has reignited speculation about his possible appointment to the post of Vice-President, which was reinstated last April. Furthermore, the surprising absence of the Chief of the Defence Staff, René Claude Meka, did not go unnoticed. Aged 87, Cameroon's most senior military official had already failed to attend the dress rehearsals for the parade on 18 May, nor the preparatory technical meeting chaired by the Minister of Defence. In early May, a rumour of his death had circulated on social media before being denied by the director of the Yaoundé University Hospital, who confirmed that he had been admitted and subsequently discharged from the facility.

On the military front, Jeune Afrique reports that there had been quiet discontent in the run-up to the ceremonies: several senior officers from the Rapid Intervention Battalion had denounced the misappropriation of bonuses and a lack of equipment, going so far as to threaten to go on strike during the preparations. Payments were only made at the last minute. In the English-speaking regions, the army was on high alert in Buea and Bamenda, with arrests reported in Ekona. Politically, opposition participation remained uneven. Maurice Kamto's MRC was banned from marching in several towns, whilst Issa Tchiroma Bakary's FSNC opted for a boycott. Finally, Paul Biya, who appeared visibly frail on screen despite instructions given to national television to limit close-ups of him, is reported to have recently cancelled a medical trip to Switzerland following a warning from allied intelligence services, fuelling further speculation about his state of health.

Strengthening ties with neighbouring Chad

In the wake of the celebrations, military cooperation between Cameroon and Chad has reached a new milestone. Indeed, in Yaoundé, Cameroon's Minister of Defence, Joseph Beti Assomo, received his Chadian counterpart, General Issakha Malloua Djamous, for a working session focused on the common security challenges facing the sub-region and the implementation of the bilateral defence framework agreement signed in September 2025. This meeting followed on directly from the 20 May celebrations, in which a contingent from Chad's National and Nomadic Guard had participated as guests of honour at the parade. Discussions focused on strengthening operational cooperation between the two armies, particularly in the face of cross-border threats and Boko Haram's activities in the Lake Chad basin, which the two nations share along more than 1,100 kilometres of common border.

Ultimately, this year's Unity Day celebrations have above all highlighted a Cameroonian state in the throes of political turmoil at the highest levels of power, whilst also grappling with security challenges along its borders. In this context, it appears that strengthening regional partnerships is one of the most readily available adjustment mechanisms at Yaoundé's disposal.

Nigeria: The presidential election approaches, security challenges persist

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In Nigeria, the next presidential election in January 2027 no longer seems so far off, at least in the minds of politicians. Whilst the opposition is already, as best it can, gearing up for battle, it is now the ruling party's turn to step up its game. Indeed, on 24 May, the current president, Bola Tinubu, was officially nominated as the candidate of the ruling APC (All Progressives Congress) party, following internal primaries that were little more than a formality. Facing a single challenger, the businessman Stanley Osifo, a complete unknown to the general public, the outgoing president met with no resistance within his party. His intention to seek a second term had never been a secret: the number 8 laid on its side – a symbol of infinity and two four-year terms – has adorned his headgear since he came to power in 2023.

Tinubu is in a strong position heading into 2027. The APC now controls 31 of the country's 36 states, up from 21 in 2023, following a wave of defections by governors from the opposition. Facing him is a fragmented and weakened opposition that has yet to nominate its candidates. And yet, Tinubu must defend a mixed record. While his economic reforms have reassured investors and revived growth, they have also severely eroded Nigerians' purchasing power: inflation exceeding 30% in 2024, petrol prices quadrupling in four years and the poverty rate rising from 56% to over 60% of the population, according to the World Bank. It is therefore on this mixed record that the 2027 presidential election will largely be decided.

A marked intensification of the Boko Haram threat?

It is well known that security challenges have been a central concern for the country's various authorities for the past two decades. As the country heads towards a new presidential election, the dramatic resurgence of Boko Haram is hardly reassuring. On 15 May, armed men attacked several schools in Oyo State, in southern Nigeria, abducting, according to sources, between 25 and 39 pupils aged between 2 and 16, as well as seven teachers. A few days later, on 22 May, the Nigerian army formally attributed these abductions to Boko Haram, stating that the jihadist group had been driven from its strongholds in the north of the country by large-scale military operations, forcing it to retreat southwards. In doing so, this episode illustrates a worrying trend. In this case, the military successes recorded in the north-east (where joint Nigerian-US airstrikes are reported to have killed 175 jihadists in the space of a few days) appear to have had the perverse effect of shifting the threat to regions that had hitherto been relatively spared.

On the same day, in the early hours of 22 May, suspected ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) terrorists launched an attack on a forward military base in Tungushe, in Borno State. They were repelled after a fierce exchange of fire. In the aftermath, troops from Operation Hadin Kai carried out search operations at around 6.00 am, neutralising at least 15 insurgents, according to military sources. Weapons, ammunition, grenades and equipment abandoned by the fleeing insurgents were recovered from the scene. Military sources report high morale among the troops and undiminished operational readiness. It thus appears, ultimately, that this resurgence of jihadist violence serves as a reminder that security will remain, in 2027, as much an electoral issue as a national imperative.