

Beat: Miscellaneous

Unknown gunmen kill 2 French journalists in northern Mali

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USPA News - Two French journalists who were interviewing a local leader of the Tuareg separatist movement were kidnapped in northern Mali on Saturday and killed within hours, the French government said. It was not immediately known who was responsible for the murders.

The attack began at approximately 1:15 p.m. local time in the northern town of Kidal after Radio France Internationale (RFI) correspondents Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon had finished interviewing Ambéry Ag Rissa, a local leader of the Tuareg separatist movement MNLA. "I heard an unusual noise in the street. Once I got to the door I saw a car, a pickup, parked next to theirs," Rissa told television station France 24. "There was a man on the ground who had a weapon. He immediately pointed me and said: 'Go back inside. Go back in.' So I went in and shortly afterwards they took off with the two journalists. They left in a great hurry." RFI said the driver of the journalists was pushed to the floor during the attack but could hear Dupont and Claude protesting and resisting as they were placed inside the vehicle. A French military helicopter, along with Malian troops and United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, were immediately sent to the area to find the journalists. Their bodies, both riddled with bullets, were recovered a few hours later about 12 kilometers (8 miles) from Kidal, local authorities said. "RFI journalists Claude Verlon and Ghislaine Dupont were found dead in Mali. They were kidnapped in Kidal by an armed group," France's foreign ministry said in a statement. "The French state, together with the Malian authorities, will make every effort to shed light on the circumstances of their deaths as soon as possible." French President François Hollande said he learnt of the deaths with "dismay" and expressed his "outrage at this heinous act." France's presidential palace said Hollande would meet with a number of ministers on Sunday to discuss the murders with Malian authorities and the UN mission in Mali. Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta later spoke with Hollande by telephone and expressed his condolences. "The two presidents expressed their willingness to relentlessly pursue the fight against the terrorist groups that are present in northern Mali," the palace said. "The heinous murders in Kidal today can only strengthen the resolve of both countries to continue and win this common struggle against terrorism." Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird strongly condemned the murders, which he described as "barbaric," and offered his condolences to the friends and families of the victims. "This shows how precarious the security situation remains in northern Mali, especially in the region of Kidal, where Islamist terrorists and Tuareg rebels are still very active despite the presence of several hundred French and UN troops," he said. "We urge the Government of Mali to continue to work with the United Nations and its international partners to combat the scourge of terrorism in the region." In July, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) took over security responsibilities from French and African forces which have battled al-Qaeda-linked fighters in the country's north. The mission is intended to help Malian authorities implement a transitional roadmap towards the full restoration of constitutional order, democratic governance and national unity. Fighting in northern Mali began in January 2012 as insurgent groups have been campaigning for independence and autonomy in the region. President Amadou Toumani Toure was ousted in a coup d'état in March 2012 for failing to handle the crisis, and by April, much of the region had been completely seized by rebel forces. Responding to requests from the Malian government, the French government decided in January of this year to deploy armed forces in Mali in an effort to prevent rebels from advancing south and reaching the country's capital. French and African forces eventually captured key cities and towns from militants and have handed over security responsibilities to MINUSMA.

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