

No Easy Answers in Mali

The extremist Islamist militias that seized control of northern Mali in April have imposed their fanatical beliefs and barbaric punishments on the region's defenseless people, sending tens of thousands of refugees fleeing into neighboring Mauritania. And they have given sanctuary to notorious terrorist groups like Nigeria's Boko Haram and Algeria's Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a group that Washington suspects may have been involved in the September attack on the American consulate in Libya.

Neighboring countries are understandably eager to help Mali's army expel these militias. This month, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved a resolution supporting an African-led military force of 3,300 to begin preparing for that mission. But there are formidable obstacles, the biggest being the political ambitions and military ineffectiveness of Mali's army.

Army officers opened the door to the extremists in March by overthrowing the democratically elected government. They claimed the government was not letting them wage an effective fight against the Libyan-armed Tuareg rebels who streamed into northern Mali after the overthrow of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

But following the military coup, first the Tuareg rebels and then the Islamist militias easily took over Mali's desert north, a region the size of France. International pressure forced the soldiers to install a civilian-led government in April. But the army, which has been accused of engaging in torture and sexual abuse of detainees, retains real power, and Mali's institutions remain shattered.

Yet it is this army and this figurehead government that the United Nations now counts on to retake the north. The African-led force that is supposed to train the Malians is experienced mainly in peacekeeping, not actual combat. That might mean drawing in American and European military trainers.

The resolution also calls for contributions to finance the operation, estimated to cost more than \$200 million a year, though it is unclear which nations would be willing to pay. Washington played a useful role in the Security Council deliberations by insisting on an initial period of planning and attention to human rights concerns before any military action takes place.

The transformation of northern Mali into a sanctuary for terrorists and the subjection of its people to medieval cruelties are a threat to the entire West African region. But even with the Security Council vote, it seems unrealistic to expect an effective solution anytime soon.
