

## International

# Mali travelers stranded as West African sanctions bite

## Relations between Mali and its neighbors have steadily deteriorated

**BAMAKO:** A bus station in Mali's capital stands unusually quiet, with foreign passengers left in limbo after West African countries closed their borders with the military-ruled nation. Africa Tours Trans is one of the main bus firms in the impoverished Sahel state, offering connections to its regional cities as well as to neighboring countries. But late Tuesday morning only one bus arrived at its station in Bamako, coming from the central Malian city of Sevare.

Dozens of would-be passengers were hanging around next to their luggage, left in limbo by recent border closures. On Sunday, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed to shutter borders with Mali and impose a trade embargo over delayed elections. The move came after Mali's army-dominated government last month proposed staying in power for up to five years before restoring democracy - despite international demands that it respect a promise to hold elections on February 27.

Relations between Mali and its neighbors have steadily deteriorated since Colonel Assimi Goita took power in a military coup in Aug 2020. The sanctions are already affecting travelers in Mali, a vast landlocked nation of 19 million people that borders seven other states. The country's location makes it a key transport hub for the region, with Bamako a key stop along the land route linking countries such as Senegal to states further east, such as Nigeria.

### 'Shocked'

Jennifer Edong, a Nigerian in her 30s who works in fashion, was among the passengers stranded at the Africa Tours Trans station in Bamako. She had

been travelling to The Gambia for work, and had arrived in Mali on Friday expecting her next connection to depart on Tuesday - only to turn up at the station and find the connection cancelled. "We are stuck here, I cannot do anything," she said, adding that she didn't have a local SIM card and disliked Malian cuisine.

Only the routes to Mauritania and Algeria - which are not ECOWAS members - and Guinea remain open. Guinea is a member of the regional bloc, but is also governed by a military junta and has decided to leave its border with Mali open. Peter Adeyemo, 48, another Nigerian who was en route to his home in The Gambia, was sleeping on a

“ We are stuck here, I cannot do anything ”

bench nearby. He opened his eyes to ask when the borders were due to open, but no one was able to answer. "I was shocked," Adeyemo told AFP of the cancelled routes, explaining that being forced to camp at the bus station meant he could not bathe, among other problems.

It is not clear when the sanctions will be lifted, nor how Mali will respond to them. Mali's interim government has pledged to "develop a response plan to safeguard our sovereignty and preserve the



**BAMAKO:** Travelers sit on benches at a bus station whilst waiting for cross border transport to resume on Tuesday. — AFP

integrity of our national territory", but has not offered any details.

### 'We'll deal with it'

For Malian travel firms, the border closures will also compound commercial problems posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has already made travel across the region more difficult. Yaya Zakaria Toure, a representative of Africa Tours Trans, said the sanctions would "make the problem even worse". All international connections scheduled this week have

been cancelled, he said. "But we'll deal with it because we have no other choice. We follow the government".

Several transport industry officials told AFP that many buses are still running, but they are now simply dropping passengers off at the border. Travelers must then cross the border on foot, baggage in hand, before catching a bus on the other side. "That's how we do it at the border with Ivory Coast, which has been closed for two years because of coronavirus," said one bus driver, who declined to be named. — AFP

## France, US, Algeria pile pressure on sanctions-hit Mali

**BAMAKO:** Pressure on Mali's junta increased Tuesday as France and the United States underlined their support for the West African bloc ECOWAS, which has slapped sanctions on the country over delayed elections following two coups. In a sharp escalation after months of diplomatic tensions, leaders from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on Sunday agreed to shutter borders with the Sahel state and impose a trade embargo.

The move came after Mali's interim government last month proposed staying in power for up to five years before staging elections - despite international demands that it respect a promise to hold elections on Feb 27. As well as shutting borders and imposing a trade embargo, ECOWAS also agreed to halt financial aid to Mali and freeze its assets at the Central Bank of West African States.

Mali's junta has condemned the measures, and urged Malians to stage nationwide demonstrations against them tomorrow. But France, Mali's former colonial power which also holds the European Union's rotating presidency, backed the sanctions. "We are in complete solidarity with the region and with this very courageous and clear stance" by ECOWAS, French President Emmanuel Macron told reporters on Tuesday. He added that the EU would seek to strengthen sanctions on the junta.

Separately, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian accused mercenaries from the Russian Wagner group of "supporting" the junta under the guise of fighting a jihadist insurgency. "What is happening in Mali is a headlong rush by the... junta which, in defiance of its commitments, hopes to hijack power for years and deprive the Malian people of their democratic choices," he added.

Washington also supported the "strong actions" by ECOWAS and urged the Mali regime to honor its pledge to return to democracy, said the US ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield. "A five-year transition is not in their interest and extends the pain of the people," she told a Security Council meeting. The presidency of Algeria, which shares a long border with Mali, also called on the junta to negotiate with ECOWAS and "reach a plan to end the crisis, taking into account international demands and the legitimate demands of the Malian people".

So far, Mali's junta has remained defiant. The country's strongman Colonel Assimi Goita, in an address late Monday, called the sanctions "illegitimate, illegal and inhumane", although he added that he remains open to dialogue with Mali's West African neighbours.

The latest political crisis caps a period of steadily deteriorating relations between Mali and its neighbors and partners, which began after Goita led a coup in August 2020 that toppled president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Under threat of sanctions following that putsch, Goita had promised to hold presidential and legislative elections, and to restore civilian rule by Feb 2022. But the strongman staged a de facto second coup in May 2021, forcing out an interim civilian government and disrupting the timetable to restore democracy. Goita also declared himself interim president. Then in December, his government proposed staying in power for up to an additional five years. — AFP

## A year on from Argentine abortion law, change is slow

**BUENOS AIRES:** A year ago Argentina joined the limited ranks of Latin American countries to have legalized abortion, but while that gave hope to millions of women, changing mentalities, practices and infrastructure has proved more difficult. "In small villages, you go for an ultrasound in the morning and in the afternoon the baker congratulates you on your pregnancy," Monik Rodriguez, 33, told AFP.

Rodriguez, who has three children, runs a service accompanying women who want to have an abortion in Salta, a conservative Catholic province in the South American country. Away from the big city of Buenos Aires, where women erupted in celebration when the law was approved, many in more remote and conservative areas of Argentina face the same stigma as before. "There are still things that need to come out of hiding," said Rodriguez, who can take up to 125 telephone calls a month as part of the project launched by the Women's Strength civil association. "The most important thing is to listen. It's about trying to overcome the hurdles, accompanying them through the health system so they don't get lost in the bureaucratic labyrinth."

Rodriguez takes calls from all sorts: Teenagers and first-time mothers to women with large families and even those that are pre-menopausal. "On this line, abortion is not recommended but neither is motherhood romanticized," said Rodriguez, who

## Owners of problem flats welcome UK cladding move

**LONDON:** Owners of flats built with combustible cladding have welcomed a UK government move to make developers contribute more to the cost of its removal following the deadly 2017 Grenfell Tower fire but say much more is needed. "I would say it's a step in the right direction, but it's certainly not a solution," said Lucy Brown, 47, a financial headhunter who lives on the top two floors of an apartment block in London's Docklands.

Housing Secretary Michael Gove on Monday said he wants the construction industry to stump up around £4 billion (\$5.4 billion) to cover the expense of removing the dangerous cladding from apartment buildings between 11 and 18 meters tall. The move marked a U-turn on heavily criticized plans announced early last year which would have required flat owners with unsafe material on their properties to

## French police arrest man over 2012 Alps killing of UK family

**GRENOBLE, France:** French police yesterday detained a man over the 2012 killing of a British family of Iraqi origin in a remote Alpine region, prosecutors said, a rare development in one of France's most notorious unsolved cold cases. The arrest will allow investigators to carry out searches and check the individual's movements around the time of the killing of three members of the Al-Hilli family and a passing cyclist on September 5, 2012, prosecutors in Annecy said.

The individual was detained by police from the



**BUENOS AIRES:** This file photo taken on Dec 10, 2020 shows an aerial view of demonstrators displaying green headscarves outside the Argentine Congress as legislators debate a bill to legalize abortion. — AFP

underwent a secret abortion a decade ago when already mother to one child.

"I was late and had an abortion. It went badly and I had to go to hospital. The tests showed I hadn't been pregnant. It was the secrecy that created worry. Along with misinformation, that is what puts us at risk." The government estimates that 3,000 women died between 1983 and 2020 in clandestine abortions, of which there were up to 500,000 a year.

### Anti-abortion pressure

For a century, abortion was only legal in cases of rape or if the mother's life was at risk. Legalization has not led to a sudden spate of abortions, particu-

access a low-interest loan scheme to help pay for the removal costs.

Brown, whose apartment block is around 18 m high, says she still has no idea when the cladding around her flat will be removed, or how much she will be charged. "This makes it very difficult to sell," said mother-of-three Brown, who is part of the End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) campaign. "Because anybody looking to buy the flats will have to take on what's essentially an uncapped charge to remediate the buildings and make them safe."

### Huge costs

Gove's new proposals came after more than four years of inaction and wrangling with the property industry following the June 2017 blaze in west London that killed 72. An official report blamed highly combustible cladding fixed to the 24-storey block as the "principal reason" the fire spread. A public inquiry is still going on. Brown says the cost of making a flat safe - wrapping the building in plastic sheets and keeping all the windows closed for up to a year - can be £200,000. "And also typically when the cladding comes off, is when they find out the full extent of the defects, and what else needs to be remedied," said

Alpine town of Chambéry. BFM TV said he was a man who had already been interviewed by police as a witness in the case but never detained. Saad Al-Hilli, a 50-year-old Iraqi-born British tourist in France, was gunned down along with his 47-year-old wife Iqbal and her 74-year-old mother in a woodland car park close to the village of Chevaline in the hills above Lake Annecy.

Each was shot several times in their British-registered BMW estate car and more than two dozen spent bullet casings were found near the vehicle. The couple's two daughters, aged seven and four at the time, survived the attack, but the older girl was shot and badly beaten. A 45-year-old French cyclist, Sylvain Mollier, was also killed after apparently stumbling upon the scene. Further details will only be made public once the man's detention period expires, the prosecutors said.

larly in places like Salta. Miranda Ruiz, 33, is the only doctor in Tartagal - a small town of 75,000 people in Salta - not to exercise her legal right to be a conscientious objector to carrying out abortions.

Anti-abortion groups in the town are influential. In September, Ruiz was briefly detained following an accusation by the aunt of a 21-year-old patient that she had performed an abortion beyond the authorized limit of 14 weeks. Feminist groups are demanding that her case be dismissed. "It is a way of bringing the other doctors to heel," said Sofia Fernandez, a member of the National Campaign for the Right to Abortion - a collective of 300 feminist organizations that have been fighting for 15 years for change. — AFP



**LONDON:** Britain's main opposition Labour Party shadow Housing Secretary Lisa Mandy speaks during a debate on cladding removal costs in the House of Commons on Jan 10, 2022. — AFP

Brown. She felt let down by a "systematic failure" and concerned about her family's safety. "We had to have very difficult discussions with our three daughters, we had to explain to them all of the measures that they needed to do in the event of a fire because having cladding on the building means that you've got minutes before it spreads everywhere," she said. — AFP

### Repeated false leads

Almost a decade after the killings, French and British police have so far failed to make any real progress in the case despite a massive effort involving officers on both sides of the Channel. During the course of the investigation, several individuals have been detained but without ever being charged. In 2014, French authorities said that a biker long wanted in connection with the murders had been identified but had no link to the killings.

After a review, authorities also no longer believe former soldier Nordahl Lelandais, who has already confessed to the killing of a hitchhiking soldier and an eight-year-old schoolgirl, could be linked to the killings. Meanwhile, Saad Al-Hilli's brother Zaid Al-Hilli, who was arrested in Britain in June 2013 on suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder, was told in early 2014 by British police there was not enough evidence to charge him. — AFP