

Operation ends at Burkina Faso hotel seized by al Qaida

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Burkina Faso (Africa): Burkina Faso and French forces killed at least three extremists and freed 126 people as they took back control of a luxury hotel in the capital that had been seized by the attackers, the minister of security said Saturday.

The Islamic extremists stormed the hotel and a nearby cafe Friday night.

Gunfire ramped up early Saturday as gendarme and military forces fought to take back the fire-blackened building. They took control of the Splendid Hotel and were searching nearby hotels to be sure there were not extremists hiding there, said Minister of Security and Internal Affairs Simon Compaore.

About 33 people have been wounded, and officials are still determining the number of casualties, he said. At least 10 bodies had been found so far, another government minister said.

The harrowing attack was launched by the same extremists behind a similar siege at an upscale hotel in Bamako, Mali in November that left 20 dead. It was not immediately known how many people remained inside the hotel in Ouagadougou as the morning call to prayer signaled a new day in this West African nation.

Dozens of French forces arrived overnight from neighboring Mali to aid in the rescue. One U.S. military member was embedded with French forces at the scene, and the United States was working to help provide France with surveillance and reconnaissance help, according to a U.S. senior defense official who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

An al-Qaida affiliate known as AQIM, or al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, claimed responsibility online as the attack was ongoing in downtown Ouagadougou at the 147-room hotel, according to the SITE Intelligence Group.

In a message posted in Arabic on the militants' "Muslim Africa" Telegram account, it said fighters "broke into a restaurant of one of the biggest hotels in the capital of Burkina Faso, and are now entrenched and the clashes are continuing with the enemies of the religion." Fighters who spoke by phone later "asserted the fall of many dead Crusaders," AQIM said, according to SITE.

Internal Affairs Minister Simon Compaore said that already 10 bodies had been found inside the Cappuccino Cafe, a restaurant that is located next to the Splendid Hotel.

"We know that the gunmen won't get out of the hotel alive," said one witness, who gave only his first name, Gilbert. "Our country is not for jihadists or terrorists. They got it wrong."

Burkina Faso, a largely Muslim country, had for years been mostly spared from the violence carried out by Islamic extremist groups who were abducting foreigners for ransom in Mali and Niger. Then last April, a Romanian national was kidnapped in an attack that was the first of its kind in Burkina Faso.

The country also has been in growing political turmoil since its longtime president was ousted in a popular uprising in late 2014. Last September members of a presidential guard launched a coup that lasted only about a week. The transitional government returned to power until Burkina Faso's November election ushered in new leaders.

The hotel attack in Mali in November also was claimed by a leader of AQIM, who said it had been carried out as a declaration of unity with Algerian militant Moktar Belmoktar's extremist group Al-Mourabitoun, according to an audio speech that was distributed by SITE at the time. Belmoktar was a former leader in AQIM before starting his own group, which now has merged back with al-Qaida.

- AP