Written by Alaba Johnson
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French forces in Mali have killed Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, a leading field commander of al Qaeda's North Africa wing AQIM, Algerian Ennahar television reported yesterday.

The station said 40 militants including Abu Zeid were killed in the region of Tigargara in northern Mali three days ago. A French Defence Ministry official declined to comment on the report. Algeria did not confirm the killing.

France launched a whirlwind assault to retake Mali's vast northern desert region from AQIM and other Islamist rebels on January 11 after a plea from Mali's caretaker government.

The military intervention dislodged the rebels from several main towns they had occupied and drove them back into desert wilds. AQIM, which stands for Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, has earned tens of millions of dollars in ransom payments for Western hostages taken to its strongholds in northern Mali.

Abu Zeid has been regarded as one of AQIM's most ruthless operators. He is believed to have

executed British national Edwin Dyer in 2009 and a 78-year-old Frenchman, Michel Germaneau, in 2010.

Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, in an account of his kidnapping by another Islamist cell in the Sahara, recounted how Abou Zeid refused to give medication to two hostages suffering from dysentery, one of whom had been stung by a scorpion.

A suicide car bombing killed six government allies in the northern city of Kidal, as French confirm that they are engaged in heavy fighting in northern Mali.

The suicide bomber exploded his vehicle Tuesday evening at a checkpoint at an entrance to Kidal, said Ag Alghabas Intalla, a leader of the Islamic Movement of Azawad, or MIA, reached by phone in Kidal. He said he counted six dead and others wounded. The MIA group is fighting with the Malian army and French troops against Islamic extremists.

Responsibility for the suicide attack has not been claimed, but it is suspected to be the work of the Islamic extremists of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, or MUJAO.