PARIS/ Bamako: France said yesterday two French journalists found dead in the northern Mali region of Kidal had been “coldly assassinated” by militants and vowed to step up security measures in the area. Radio journalists Claude Verlon and Ghislaine Dupont were abducted after interviewing a member of the MNLA Tuareg separatist group in northern Mali.

Their bodies were found on Saturday by a French patrol 12 km (8 miles) outside Kidal, the birthplace of a Tuareg uprising last year that plunged Mali into chaos, leading to a coup in the capital Bamako and the occupation of the northern half of the country by militants linked to Al Qaeda. Full details of why the journalists were killed and who carried out the attack were not immediately clear, but security officials said the situation in Kidal was uncontrollable and that it was necessary to secure the area, which is shared by several countries.

Security in the area and the surrounding region will be increased, France said after a specially convened meeting between President Francois Hollande and key cabinet ministers. He did not elaborate. Mali government spokesman Mahamane Ould Heidaid said those comments saying President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and Hollande had agreed that the status quo could not remain during a telephone call on Saturday.

Kidal is a serving as a base for international attacks. Although Malian, UN and French troops are stationed in Kidal, none are heavily deployed. The Malian army’s contingent is generally symbolic and soldiers are confined to their base. There are about 200 UN peacekeepers (MINUSMA) who are officially in control of security and France also has about 200 troops, though their operations in the region have focused on the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains to the north, which served for years as a hideout for militants.

President Hollande holds crisis meeting on shock Mali killings

PARIS: Pictures of French RFI journalists, Ghislaine Dupont (right) and Claude Verlon on a poster headed “RFI and all France Media World in Mourning” displayed in a window yesterday. — AP

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