Dakar - Armed men killed three soldiers and injured five more in Senegal on Thursday in the latest outbreak of violence in the troubled Casamance region, the West African country's army said on Friday.

(02.04.2004)
Separatists have waged a low-level rebellion in the area since 1982 which has killed hundreds, but hopes for an end to the conflict have risen since President Abdoulaye Wade said in January that peace was nigh.

“They (the soldiers) were attacked while they were removing landmines,” said a military source in Ziguinchor, the provincial capital of Casamance, which borders Guinea-Bissau.

“They were not expecting an attack because it has been quiet for quite some time now,” the source said.

A spokesman for Senegal’s army confirmed there had been an attack by “unidentified armed groups”. It took place near the village of Guidel some 20 km (13 miles) east of Ziguinchor.

The attack also comes a month after clashes between soldiers and armed men left five dead and 14 injured just across the border in Guinea-Bissau. Fighters from the rebel Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) often seek refuge there.

The lush southern province of Casamance, cut off from the rest of the former French colony by tiny Gambia, was Senegal’s bread basket and a top tourist destination prior to the unrest.

However while the region is still littered with landmines, many people who had fled over the years have taken hope from the fledgling peace process and started to return.

The government has launched a major reconstruction project for the region and started removing landmines.

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