

European powers and ECOWAS threaten military intervention after coup in Niger

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On Sunday, the leaders of 15 West African states issued an ultimatum to Niger, the former French West African colony where soldiers seized power in a coup on Wednesday, threatening military action unless President Mohamed Bazoum was restored to office within a week.

The leaders of the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union, issued their threat after a crisis summit in the Nigerian capital of Abuja. It followed earlier threats by the United States and France, which both have troops stationed in Niger, that they would cut hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of aid and military support unless Bazoum was reinstated.

ECOWAS said it would take "all measures necessary" to restore democratic rule in Niger that "may include the use of force" and imposition of financial sanctions on those who carried out the coup led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani, the longtime chief of Niger's presidential guard who has declared himself head of a transitional government.

French President Emmanuel Macron declared, "This coup d'état is perfectly illegitimate and deeply dangerous for Nigeriens, for Niger, and for the entire region." On Saturday, France suspended all development aid and budget support, worth about €120 million (\$130 million) in 2022, to the country, home to France's largest regional base after it was forced to leave Mali in 2021.

The European Union (EU) also cut off all budget support and security aid, worth €503 million (\$554 million) over the 2021-24 period, with immediate effect, according to a statement issued by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on Saturday.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for Bazoum's immediate release and offered Washington's "unflagging support." He warned that American security ties with Niger were in jeopardy. US aid to Niger has totalled about \$500 million since 2012, including a \$100

million air base 5km south east of Agadez, making Niger the largest recipient of US aid in West Africa.

On Friday, the African Union issued a statement demanding that the military return to barracks and restore the president within 15 days.

Bazoum was possibly ousted because he had sought to change the high military command. Although detained along with his family in the presidential palace in the capital, Niamey, he has been in telephone contact with international leaders, including Blinken. His election in 2021 marked the first democratic transition of power in Niger, a country that has seen four military coups since independence from France in 1960.

Speaking on state television Friday, Tchiani said he had taken control of the government to prevent "the gradual and inevitable demise" of the country and declared he was the "president of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland." He said that while Bazoum had tried to convince people that "all is going well ... the harsh reality (is) a pile of dead, displaced, humiliation and frustration." He added, "The security approach today has not brought security to the country despite heavy sacrifices," a reference to Niger's reliance on France's military support.

Colonel Amadou Abdramane, a spokesperson for the putschists, said the military had closed Niger's borders, declared a nationwide curfew and suspended all the institutions of the state. He warned against any foreign intervention, saying, "All foreign military intervention of whatever kind poses the risk of disastrous and uncontrollable consequences for our population and the chaos of our country."

The French President's office declared, "Should anyone attack French nationals, the army, diplomats and French interests, they will see France respond in an immediate and intractable manner... The President of the Republic will not tolerate any attack against France and its

interests.” In response, coup supporters on Sunday tried to set fire to the French Embassy, shouting support for Russian leader Vladimir Putin despite calls from the Kremlin to release Bazoum.

Macron has been visiting France’s former colonial possessions, Vanuatu and New Caledonia, in the Pacific in a bid to reassert France’s interests in the region, not only against Beijing but also Washington.

Behind the threats of the imperialist powers and Niger’s former colonial master, who has no compunctions about crushing opposition to his rule in the interests of France’s financial elite, there is considerable apprehension that the coup will endanger their predatory interests in the region.

Landlocked Niger has become an increasingly important ally for the imperialist powers in their efforts to suppress Islamist insurgencies in the resource-rich but impoverished Sahel region, particularly after the military leaders running Mali and Burkina Faso demanded they withdraw their troops after the failed Barkhane and Sabre military operations. This latest coup is the sixth since 2020 in the greater Sahel region—following one in Guinea and two each in Burkina Faso and Mali. Neighboring Mali forced France to remove its soldiers in 2021 in favour of Russia’s Wagner Group, which has been able to take advantage of France’s and other Western countries’ worsening relations with the Sahelian states.

Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin supported the coup, saying Thursday that “what happened in Niger is the fight of its people against the colonizers. ... It effectively means winning independence.”

Niger has some of the world’s largest reserves of cobalt, diamonds, platinum, and uranium. It is the main supplier of uranium to the European Union, ahead of Kazakhstan and Russia. Since 1968, Orano (formerly Areva), a company 45 percent owned by the French state, has mined uranium around the northern desert town of Arlit. Just two mines account for around a third of the multi-billion-dollar company’s total global production of the uranium used to generate France’s nuclear power, which not only provides 70 percent of the country’s electricity but also much of Europe’s, including Germany.

Orano’s mining concession, bought cheaply with tied aid, mostly in the form of loans to the country, has depleted the region’s water resources—few local people have running water—produced millions of tonnes of radioactive waste and left Niger at the bottom of the world’s wealth table. More than 10 million of Niger’s 24 million population live in extreme poverty, while

approximately 17 percent of the country’s population require humanitarian assistance. The Nigerien government’s annual budget has typically been a fraction of Orano’s yearly revenue.

Following its forced exit from Mali, France’s military support for Niger has involved training the Nigerien army and supplying it with intelligence and air resources under the rubric of “the war against Islamic terrorist organizations” such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic State and Boko Haram.

The imperialists’ “war on terror” is a fraud. The US, UK, France and NATO used these same groups to wage their proxy wars in Libya and especially in Syria. After fighting in the NATO-led war against Libya in 2011, Al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups took refuge in the countries of the Sahel region. Using these wars as a pretext, imperialist powers like France, America and Germany plundered Africa’s richest resources. In October 2021, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga accused the French government of secretly arming Islamist terrorists to maintain the conflict in the country and justify the French military occupation.

The growing bloodshed in the region, which includes many of the world’s poorest countries, is the result of France’s more than 10-year neo-colonial war across the Sahel. Violence has resurfaced in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and other countries. The imperialists are using divide-and-rule policies to maintain control over a region characterized by multiple ethnic and tribal group, instigating ethnic riots and bloody massacres in the region.

The ongoing conflict in Niger, where kidnappings, assassinations, thefts and threats are rife, has displaced nearly 380,000 people as of late March, while the country is also hosting more than 700,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from neighboring Mali and Nigeria. Niger is also a transit route for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa heading north to Europe to escape conflict and poverty.



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