

West African states reiterate threat of military action against Niger, but are hampered by divisions

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18 August 2023

Leaders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met in the Ghanaian capital Accra Thursday and Friday to discuss their response to the coup in Niger. The bloc insists Niger's new military leaders led by Abdourahamane Tchiani reinstate President Mohamed Bazoum, currently held hostage. It has threatened military action as a last resort.

After a series of abandoned ultimatums, delayed meetings and open divisions among member states, ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Stability Abdel-Fatau Musah aimed to project a firmer stance. He told the assembled leaders Thursday, "If everything else fails, the valiant forces of West Africa are ready to answer to the call of duty."

Citing previous ECOWAS interventions in the Gambia and Liberia, Musah warned, "If push comes to shove we are going into Niger with our own contingents and equipment and our own resources to make sure we restore constitutional order."

In a veiled reference to the US, France and other imperialist powers, he added, "If other democratic partners want to support us they are welcome."

He claimed all of the bloc's members, bar Cape Verde and those under military rule in Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso, had agreed to provide troops. Ivory Coast's President Alassane Ouattara has publicly committed 1,100 soldiers. Sierra Leone, Senegal and Benin have also indicated their support.

Significant obstacles stand in the way of a military intervention, however. Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso have not just refused to provide troops to ECOWAS, they have pledged military support to Niger in any conflict. The governments in Liberia and the Gambia have so far refrained from backing an intervention.

Although not aligning themselves with Niger, many

countries in the African Union oppose military action. At a reportedly "difficult" meeting of its Peace and Security Council in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa on Monday, members rejected the proposed ECOWAS intervention. Several countries in northern and southern Africa were "fiercely against", according to one diplomat speaking to French media.

There are also domestic divisions affecting ECOWAS members. The Nigerian senate has refused to endorse military action by the bloc's most powerful country, urging a diplomatic solution.

Opposition figures in the Ghanaian parliament have called on President Nana Akufo-Addo to halt preparations for an intervention. Foreign Affairs Committee member Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa told the BBC that the president "lacks a mandate from the Ghanaian people in this regard... We firmly believe that resorting to military intervention is not the optimal course of action."

Reporting from the ECOWAS meeting for *France 24*, Justice Baidoo commented Friday that it was "very difficult to get any information from a lot of the ECOWAS officials who are here. On one hand they say that they are very settled in that this action is going to happen. On another they are unable to tell when and how that is going to happen."

The coup leaders in Niger have felt strengthened, announcing their intention put Bazoum on trial for high treason. From Saturday, civilians over the age of 18 will be encouraged to sign up to a Volunteers for the Defence of Niger organisation to help fight an invasion.

Divisions over a military intervention by ECOWAS reflect serious concerns in African governments that the consequences would destabilise their rule. Niger occupies a pivotal position in the Sahel region which has been wracked by conflicts with non-state armed groups for

over a decade.

Rooted in the poverty of the region, the lack of jobs for a rapidly growing population, competition over scarce water reserves and pastures, a spur was given to the growth of these groups by an influx of NATO's Islamist proxies from the war on Libya in 2011. Over 6,000 civilians were killed by these forces in the Western Sahel in 2021, and 9,000 in 2022. Over two million people have been internally displaced by the violence of the last decade, and nearly half a million are refugees in neighbouring countries.

Any war would massively worsen the situation, creating more refugees and the conditions for militias to spread across the region.

The economic disruption would also compound raging social crises in multiple West African states. Inflation in Ghana is over 40 percent, while interest payments on government debt were until recently consuming over 70 percent of revenues, forcing a default and \$3 billion IMF bailout and restructuring programme. This will involve mostly regressive tax rises lifting the price of water, electricity and fuel, plus reductions in government spending.

Inflation in Nigeria is at an 18-year high of 24 percent following economic reforms demanded by international investors. The country's central statistics agency noted "increases in prices of oil and fat, bread and cereals, fish, potatoes, yam and other tubers, fruits, meat, vegetable, milk, cheese, and eggs." Its population shares close cultural and economic ties with Niger and is broadly opposed to any conflict.

Given that persistent violence and economic distress are the main sources of the popular discontent which military leaders have exploited to act against their governments in recent years, any intervention could have the opposite effect to its stated goal of dissuading coups in the region, with ECOWAS leaders' necks on the line.

West African governments and their military chiefs both fear a genuinely popular uprising in which mass anti-imperialist sentiment and social discontent is turned against the entire ruling class, complicit in the exploitation of the population by foreign powers.

For the same reasons the imperialist countries, except for France, have been circumspect in supporting a military intervention in Niger. The United States and the European powers have repeatedly expressed concern at the rising influence of both China and Russia in a resource rich and strategically located region. But with ECOWAS divided, they are worried about its ability to advance their interests

in a region where political turmoil has given Russia's Wagner mercenary group the chance to establish a presence.

The Western powers would undoubtedly prefer to see Bazoum back in the saddle, having invested billions of dollars in military training and various forms of "aid" in Niger in the last decade. To that end they have suspended aid programmes and endorsed ECOWAS's blockade and sanctions, to devastating effect on what is already one of the world's poorest countries.

The US has supported ECOWAS's threat of measures up to and including military action but talk of military action is at this point still bound with caveats regarding first seeking a diplomatic solution. Kathleen FitzGibbon has been sent to Nigerien capital Niamey as America's first active ambassador in the country in two years, following an earlier and unsuccessful visit by Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland.

This could change rapidly if Washington is convinced that a military intervention could be successful. But to date the US State Department has refrained from officially designating the military takeover in Niger a coup while it works out the future of its military presence in the country. Pentagon press secretary Sabrina Singh commented bluntly Tuesday, "We have assets and interests in the region, and our main priority is protecting those interests and protecting those of our allies... a [coup] designation ... certainly changes what we'd be able to do in the region, and how we'd be able to partner with the Nigerien military."

Those assets include 1,100 soldiers and a \$100 million air base in the north of the country used as the base of operations for US drone flights in West Africa. Sources told the CNN broadcaster, in its words, "If a coup determination is made, administration officials have also explored the possibility of issuing a waiver to allow certain US military activities to continue."



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