

# Macron threatens war as Niger's junta calls to expel French ambassador

**Athiyan Silva****28 August 2023**

Last Friday, Niger's military junta in Niamey gave French Ambassador to Niger Sylvain Itté a 48-hour deadline to leave the country. The deadline to expel the French ambassador comes after Niger's August 3 cancellation of five military cooperation agreements signed between 1977 and 2020. It ordered on August 14 that all French troops in Niger, which is a former French colony, leave the country by early September.

The letter issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Niger appointed by the junta indicated "that the competent Nigerien authorities had decided to withdraw their approval from Mr. Sylvain ITTE and to ask him to leave Nigerien territory within forty-eight hours." The ministry said the decision to expel the ambassador was "in response to actions taken by the French government against Niger's interests." This included the ambassador's refusal to respond to an invitation to meet with Niger's new foreign minister.

An ultimatum against the French ambassador was quickly rejected by the French Foreign Ministry in Paris which has repeatedly stated that he does not recognize the authority of the Nigerien junta. "The putschists do not have the authority to make this request, the ambassador's approval coming only from the legitimate elected Nigerien authorities," the French government said.

Yesterday, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at a yearly conference of French ambassadors in the Elysée presidential palace. Macron declared that Itté would stay in Niger and that military action would be prepared against Niger. He declared that the junta in Niamey "has no authority" to tell Itté to leave their country. He also hailed the "responsible policy" of African countries in the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) that might invade Niger at the behest of Paris and Washington.

He praised plans for "supporting diplomatic action, and once it is agreed upon military action, by ECOWAS in the framework of a partnership."

Macron also implicitly criticized opposition to plans for French-led military interventions against Niger and military regimes in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso. "The weakness that some had towards previous putsches have encouraged regional tendencies," he said.

In reality, the putsches are the product of over a decade of bloody NATO wars across Africa and, in particular, across much of France's former colonial empire in Africa. After NATO's 2011 war on Libya in 2011, France launched in 2013 a nine-year military occupation of Mali, during which it posted thousands of troops in Niger and Burkina Faso. Amid mounting anger, strikes and protests against the French military presence, French troops were forced to leave Mali last year.

Governments that worked closely with French military operations in Mali, Burkina Faso and now Niger have fallen amid growing popular anger, replaced by military regimes that have sought out ties with Russia and the Wagner Group militia also active in the Ukraine conflict.

Now, amid the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine, there are growing threats of a major escalation in Africa. France in particular is pushing for a war in which ECOWAS heavyweights like Nigeria, Ghana or the Ivory Coast would provide ground troops for a NATO-led war to take back Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Paris, Washington and other NATO powers have backed ECOWAS's call to reinstate Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum, whom the junta ousted in a coup on July 26.

On August 24, the day before Niger called to expel

Itté, the foreign ministers of Burkina Faso and Mali, Olivia Rouamba and Abdoulaye Diop, respectively, went to Niamey to meet with junta leader General Abdurahamane Thiani. They then signed agreements authorizing the defense and security forces of Burkina Faso and Mali to intervene on Nigerien territory in the event of an attack.

Last week, representatives of ECOWAS held talks with General Abdourahmane Tchiani in Niamey. The meeting came a day after officials of the ECOWAS states said they were ready to intervene militarily to reinstate Bazoum.

While the ECOWAS delegation was in Niamey, Tchiani claimed he would hold power for a maximum of “three years” before returning power to an elected regime. The delegation insisted that the plan proposed by the military junta was unacceptable, and that Mohamed Bazoum should be reinstated. Thus, the negotiations ended in failure.

The junta refused to reinstate Bazoum. General Tchiani warned ECOWAS against any intervention in Niger, stating: “But let us be clear. If an attack were to be undertaken against us, it will not be the walk in the park some people seem to think.”

On August 26, thousands took to the streets of Niamey and gathered at Niger’s General Seyni Kountché Stadium, chanting anti-French slogans, after French officials denounced “illegal military rulers” in Niger. They hoisted Nigerian, Algerian and Russian flags.

Participating in this demonstration was Ramato Ibrahim Boubakar. “We have the right to choose the partners we want, and France must respect this choice, we have never been free for 60 years,” he said.

There are calls for further protests in front of the French military and air force base in Niamey starting on September 3, to demand the withdrawal of French troops from Niger.

Algeria, which borders Mali and Niger to the north, has opposed any foreign military action in Niger since the July 26 coup. After the military regime in Algiers allowed French warplanes to use its airspace to bomb targets in Mali during the 2013-2022 war in that country, it suddenly shifted its position 180 degrees. It has announced that it will not grant French fighter bombers the right to overfly Algeria. French military flights that take four hours via Algeria to Niger or Mali

are to be forced to take a 10-hour detour.

Niger’s junta, which ordered the French ambassador to leave the country, has not issued similar orders to the ambassadors of the US, Italy and Germany. A US State Department spokesman confirmed that “no such request has been made to the US government,” according to Reuters.

On August 7, as French imperialism prepared ECOWAS for military intervention in Niger, Washington sent Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to hold talks with the junta. “The stakes for France in Niger are much higher than for Washington. ... This is a psychological and strategic defeat for France,” said Cameron Hudson, a former White House National Security Council official focused on Africa, to *Politico* magazine.

New interimperialist tensions are rising, in particular, between France and the United States. “After the Niger putsch, France fears being overtaken by its US ally,” wrote *Le Figaro*, citing frustration by French officials at the fact that the junta leaders plan to let US troops but not French troops remain in Niger. “With allies like that, we don’t need enemies,” said an official of the French Foreign Ministry.

Above all, however, the NATO powers are moving to intervene militarily in Africa and escalate the war with Russia they are already waging in Ukraine. Amid threats of NATO and ECOWAS intervention, military tensions are surging in the region. All divisions of the Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali armies have been placed on alert. About 10,000 volunteers in Niger have joined the army and received basic training. Reports suggest that Russia’s Wagner Group is training them.

The decisive political issue is the unification of the growing movement of African workers and oppressed rural people against the French and NATO wars with workers in the NATO countries, Russia, Ukraine and beyond in an international movement of the working class against imperialist war.



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