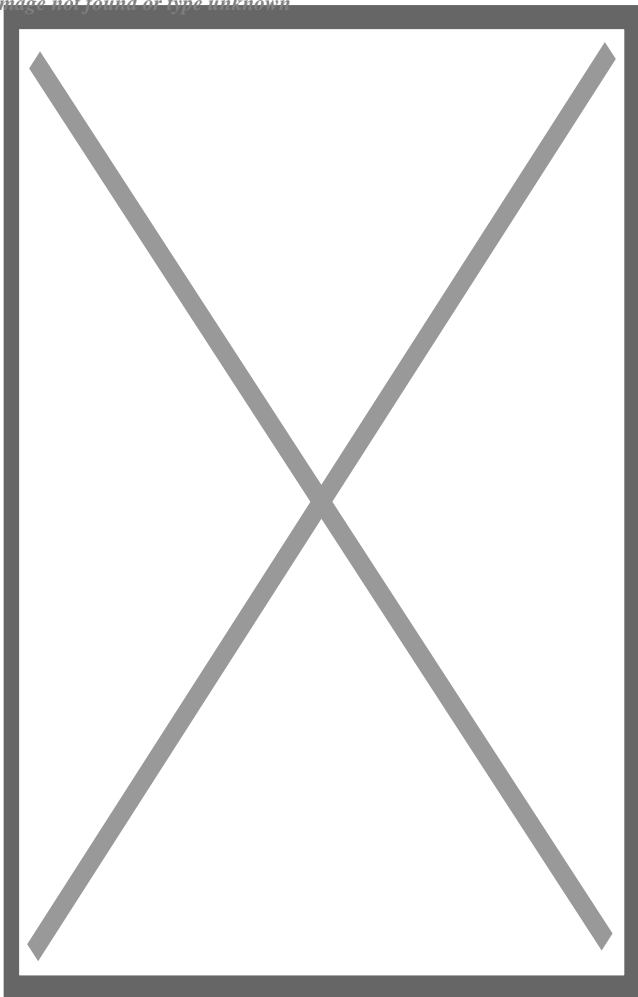


Nigerian delegation says Niger military leaders open to diplomacy

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Niamey, August 13 (RHC)-- Coup leaders in Niger say they are open to diplomacy to resolve a standoff with West Africa's regional bloc, according to a group of senior Nigerian Islamic scholars who have met the military leaders in the capital, Niamey.

The visit comes as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) explores its options to restore civilian rule in Niger, including potential military intervention, following the removal of President Mohamed Bazoum last month – the seventh coup in West and Central Africa in three years.

In a sign the West African bloc is still pushing for a peaceful resolution, ECOWAS Chairman and Nigerian President Bola Tinubu approved Saturday's mission to Niamey by the delegation of Islamic scholars, who had vowed to promote dialogue.

The group's meeting with military government leader General Abdourahamane Tchiani lasted several hours, said Sheikh Abdullahi Bala Lau, who led the delegation. "He said their doors were open to explore diplomacy and peace in resolving the matter," Lau said in a statement on Sunday.

Tchiani reportedly emphasised the historic ties between Niger and Nigeria, saying the countries "were not only neighbours but brothers and sisters who should resolve issues amicably".

There was no immediate comment from the military leaders on the meeting, but Tchiani's reported comments are one of the few recent signs that he is open to negotiation. The coup leaders' previous rebuffs of diplomatic efforts by ECOWAS, the United States and others had raised the spectre of further conflict in the Sahel region of West Africa, where armed groups have increased their influence in recent years.

With diplomacy faltering last week, ECOWAS activated a standby military force that it said would be deployed as a last resort if talks failed. For now, the bloc is pursuing efforts for further negotiations. On Saturday, the bloc's parliament said it would ask Tinubu, who holds the revolving chairmanship, for permission to go to Niger, its spokesperson said.

French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu said in an interview with the regional newspaper Var-Matin on Sunday that France fully supports the latest decisions by ECOWAS. Asked if he feared armed intervention in Niger, Lecornu replied: "No."

On Saturday, Tchiani sent a delegation, led by his defence chief General Moussa Salaou Barmou, to the Guinean capital Conakry to thank leaders there for their support – a sign of the coup leaders' desire to affirm alliances as they stand up to regional and other powers.

"We are Pan-African. When our people have problems, we are always present, and we will always be there," Guinea's interim President Mamady Doumbouya said at the meeting, according to a video shared late on Saturday night by the presidency.

In the footage, Doumbouya – who led a coup in Guinea in September 2021 – did not say whether Conakry's support for the Niger coup leaders would include military backing if ECOWAS decided to use military force. Mali and Burkina Faso have already said they would help defend Niger.

The July 26th coup is seen as a major blow to many Western nations, which viewed Niger as a partner in the Sahel region that they could work with to beat back a growing uprising by groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS).

The U.S. and France have more than 2,500 military personnel in the region and together with other European countries have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in military assistance and training Niger's forces.

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