

Thousands in Niger rally in support of coup leaders

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Niamey, August 7 (RHC)--Thousands of supporters of the military coup in Niger gathered at a Niamey stadium Sunday, when a deadline set by the West African regional bloc ECOWAS to return the deposed President Mohamed Bazoum to power is set to expire, according to AFP journalists.

A delegation of members of the now-ruling National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) arrived at the 30,000-seat stadium in the capital Niamey on Sunday to cheers from supporters, many of whom carried portraits of the military leaders.

The stadium – named after Seyni Kountche, who led Niger’s first coup d’etat in 1974 – was almost full and the atmosphere was festive. General Mohamed Toumba, one of the CNSP leaders, denounced in a speech those “lurking in the shadows” who were “plotting subversion” against “the forward march of

Niger”. “We are aware of their Machiavellian plan,” said Toumba.

The demonstration coincides with the ultimatum set by ECOWAS on July 30 for the coup leaders to reinstate Bazoum. But so far the generals who seized power in Niamey on July 26 have shown no sign of a willingness to give way.

ECOWAS military chiefs agreed to a plan Friday for a possible military intervention to respond to the crisis, with the armies of countries including Senegal and Ivory Coast saying they were ready to participate.

Neighbouring Nigeria’s Senate pushed back against the plan and urged the country’s president, the ECOWAS bloc’s current chair, to explore options other than the use of force. Algeria and Chad, non-ECOWAS neighbours with strong militaries in the region, have said they oppose military action and will not intervene.

Meanwhile, neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso – both run by the military – say an invasion of Niger by ECOWAS troops would be a declaration of war against them, too.

The coup is a major blow to the United States and allies who saw Niger as the last major “counterterrorism” partner in the Sahel, a vast area south of the Sahara Desert where fighters linked to al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS) have been expanding their range and beginning to threaten coastal states such as Benin, Ghana and Togo.

The US, France and European countries have poured hundreds of millions of dollars of military assistance into Niger. France has 1,500 soldiers in the country, though their fate is now in question. Washington has 1,100 US military personnel also in Niger, where they operate an important drone base in the city of Agadez.

While Niger’s coup leaders have claimed they acted because of growing insecurity, conflict incidents decreased by nearly 40 percent in the country compared to the previous six-month period, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

That is in contrast to surging attacks in Mali, which kicked out French forces and partnered with the private Russian military company the Wagner Group, and Burkina Faso, which has gotten rid of French forces as well.

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