

Niger's military rulers order police to expel French ambassador

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Nigeriens protest in Niamey on August 26, 2023, a month after the coup, to support the putschist soldiers and demand the French ambassador leave [Mahamadou Hamidou/Reuters]

Niamey, August 31 (RHC)-- Niger's military rulers have ordered police to expel France's ambassador, a move that marks a further downturn in relations and one that French authorities say the army officers who seized power in Niamey last month had no authority to make.

The coup's leaders are following the strategy of military governments in neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso in distancing themselves from the region's former colonial power amid a wave of anti-French sentiment.

The visas of French Ambassador Sylvain Itte and his family have been cancelled, and police have been instructed to expel the envoy, the military administration said in a statement dated Tuesday and confirmed as authentic on Thursday by its head of communications.

Last Friday, instigators of the coup, which has been condemned by African leaders and Western nations, ordered Itte to leave the country within 48 hours in response to what they called actions by France "contrary to the interests of Niger."

The statement said these actions included the envoy's refusal to respond to an invitation to meet Niger's new foreign minister. The envoy "no longer enjoys the privileges and immunities attached to his status as member of the diplomatic personnel in the French embassy", the letter, seen by the Agence France-Presse news agency, read.

"[His] diplomatic cards and visas and those of the members of his family have been cancelled. The police have been instructed to proceed to his expulsion."

Since toppling democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum, the military has leveraged anti-French sentiment among the population to shore up its support.

France has called for the ousted president to be returned to office and said it would support efforts by the Economic Community of West African States, to overturn the coup.

France has made Niger the cornerstone of operations against armed groups in the Sahel region. The fighting has killed thousands of people over the past decade, and France has deployed about 1,500 soldiers in Niger to support its military.

Paris redefined its strategy after withdrawing thousands of its soldiers from neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso after the coups there.

France has not officially recognised a decision by Niger's military leaders to revoke bilateral military agreements, saying those had been signed with the country's "legitimate authorities." Similarly, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs said on Thursday that the coup leaders do not have the authority to ask the ambassador to leave. It added that it is "constantly assessing the security and operating conditions of our embassy."

French military spokesman Colonel Pierre Gaudilliere warned: "The French military forces are ready to respond to any upturn in tension that could harm French diplomatic and military premises in Niger." "Measures have been take to protect these premises," he said.

This week, French President Emmanuel Macron said the ambassador would stay in the country and reiterated France's support for Bazoum.



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