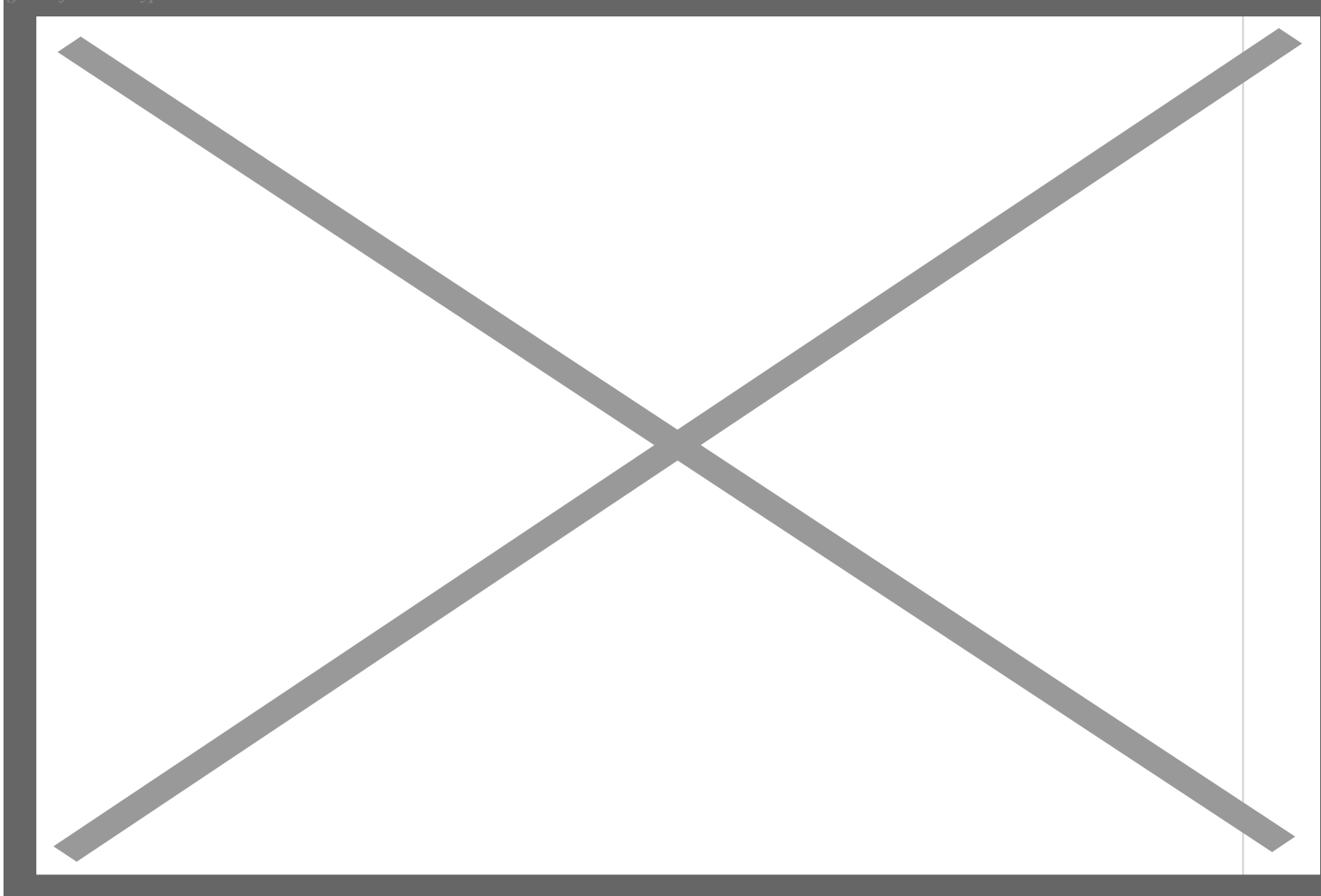


Niger coup leaders warn against military intervention by ECOWAS

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General Abdourahmane Tchiani (second from right), who was declared as the new head of state of Niger by leaders of a coup, arrives to meet with ministers in Niamey [Balima Boureima/Reuters]

Niamey, July 30 (RHC)-- Niger's military leaders have warned against any armed intervention in the country as West African heads of state gather in Nigeria's capital for an emergency summit to decide on further actions to pressure the army to restore constitutional order.

Heads of state of the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union, also known by its French acronym UEMOA, could suspend Niger from their institutions, cut off the country from the regional central bank and financial market, and close borders.

General Abdourahmane Tchiani – also known as Omar Tchiani, and the chief of Niger's presidential guard – has declared himself leader while the country's elected president, Mohamed Bazoum, has been held by the military since the coup took place last week.

Ahead of the Sunday ECOWAS summit, the military leaders in Niger warned against any military intervention in a statement read on Niger national television on Saturday night. "The objective of the [ECOWAS] meeting is to approve a plan of aggression against Niger through an imminent military intervention in Niamey in collaboration with other African countries that are non-members of ECOWAS, and certain Western countries," military spokesperson Colonel Amadou Abdramane said. "We want to once more remind ECOWAS or any other adventurer of our firm determination to defend our homeland," he said.

ECOWAS has the power to impose sanctions on Niger, which is one of its 15 members. Last year, its leaders agreed to create a regional security force to intervene against rebel groups and prevent military coups. "There is so much talk here [at the summit] of sending a military force to intervene there [in Niger] that has got the military leaders in Niger worried at the moment," Al Jazeera's Ahmed Idris reported from Abuja, adding that the threat of sanctions over the coup was also a cause for concern for the new rulers in Niamey.

"There has been a standby force for years, but it has never been activated in recent times. The [last] time it was activated was in 2017 in the Gambia ... when former President Yahya Jammeh tried to stay in power after he lost the election to the current president," Idris added.

Details on how that force would work and its funding are still unclear, with ECOWAS defence ministers expected to make decisions later this year.

Bola Tinubu, president of Nigeria and ECOWAS chairman, said on Friday that the West African bloc and the international community "would do everything to defend democracy and ensure democratic governance continues to take firm root in the region."

Former colonial ruler France and the European Union have suspended security cooperation and financial aid to Niger following the coup.

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