

Briefing on the situations in Niger and Gabon

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Tomorrow (23 October), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1180th session to receive updates on developments in Niger and Gabon following the recent unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) in the two countries.

Following opening remarks by Daniel Owassa, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Congo and Chairperson of the PSC for the month of October, Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), is expected to make a statement. Representatives of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) are also expected to deliver statements on Niger and Gabon respectively as the concerned Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

At its 1168th session held on 14 August, the PSC decided to suspend Niger from all activities of the AU, and its organs and institutions until effective restoration of constitutional order. At its 1172nd emergency session convened on 31 August, the PSC also adopted a similar decision with respect to Gabon.

Over the past several weeks, the situation in these two countries evolved quite differently. In Niger, the tension that ensued between the military junta and ECOWAS following ECOWAS decisions slapping raft of sanctions on Niger and threatening military intervention for reinstating the ousted government of President Mohammed Bazoum has persisted. Mali and Burkina Faso, two other West African countries being ruled

by military leaders, pledged to come to Niger's aid in the event of a military intervention by ECOWAS. Accordingly, the three countries signed what they called the Liptako-Gourma charter to forge a collective defense and mutual assistance pact. The charter was named after the border triangle between the three countries which has been the source of instability in the Sahel. The fate of G5 Sahel remains unclear in the face of this development. G5 Sahel has been "paralyzed" for quite some time following Mali's decision to withdraw after it was blocked from assuming the rotating chairmanship of the group. The security situation appears to have worsened in all these three countries with a significant surge of attacks by armed groups and terrorists recently.

At the moment, it appears that the possibility of an ECOWAS military intervention has lost steam in the face of division within West Africa but also lack of wider African support as illustrated by the decision of the PSC declining the request of ECOWAS for receiving endorsement for its decisions including for undertaking military intervention for reinstating the deposed President. ECOWAS maintained that it is keeping all options open for a peaceful resolution of the crisis. In this regard, it sent delegations to Niamey on several occasions to engage in talks with military leaders who later [proposed a three-year transition of power](#) and appointed a civilian prime minister. Although there were media reports about proposed timelines by ECOWAS for the transition in Niger, the organization refuted these claims and insisted that the military leaders in Niamey should restore constitutional order immediately.

Algeria, which shares a long border with Niger, has offered its mediation to resolve the crisis in that country. It reportedly proposed a six-month transition period with the participation of all parties in Niger. This proposal envisages the establishment of a consensual civilian authority accepted by all sides of the Nigerian political class to lead the

transition and pave the way for the restoration of constitutional order. The military leaders in Niamey reportedly accepted Algeria's mediation but insisted that the timeline for the transition should be determined by Nigerians themselves. Although there were expectations for follow-up engagement in Niamey, Algeria reportedly suspended its initiative because of concerns over public pronouncements by the Nigerian military leaders which seems to have cast doubts about their willingness to accept the mediation.

The Nigerian military leaders had altercations with France, the former colonial power which maintains a military presence in Niger, making Niger a major hub for its counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel region following the ejection of French troops from Mali. France came out strongly in support of the ECOWAS decision on Niger which led the military leaders in Niamey to demand that the country withdraw its forces from Niger. Although it initially resisted to heed the demand disputing the legitimacy of the military junta to make such decisions, France has already started withdrawal. The United States also maintains a military presence in Niger and has sent its acting deputy secretary of state Victoria Nuland to engage in talks with the military leaders in Niamey. The US had refrained from characterizing the situation as a coup d'état, but on 10 October the state department issued a statement concluding that a coup d'état took place in Niger. While this would lead to freezing of security and related assistance, the implication of this announcement on its military presence in Niger remains unclear. The country has already suspended its assistance to Niger but said that it will maintain life-saving humanitarian, food, and health assistance to the Nigerian people.

The UN General Assembly in New York saw high-level engagement on the Nigerian issue, including a meeting between several ECOWAS leaders and the US Secretary of State. There has also been tension between the UN and the Nigerian military leaders

who wanted to take part in the General Assembly but were excluded from attending the meeting. In response to this development, they have ordered the UN resident coordinator in Niamey to leave the country within 72 hours.

In Gabon, the situation appears to have unfolded differently. While the military junta seems disposed to diplomatic engagements and expressed their commitment to restore constitutional order, they have not as yet indicated any timeline for the transition period. This lack of commitment for timeline is not totally surprising. Given that the opposition presidential candidate performed well in the elections but the military coup interrupted the electoral processes to play itself out to its logical conclusion, it may not be in the interest of the military junta to proceed to elections in a short period of time. There is indeed a risk that if elections were to be held in a short term, the leading opposition candidate may win the election and this may not settle well with those that would like to sustain the status quo.

The Gabonese military also released the deposed president Ali Bongo Ondimba but his wife, under house arrest since the coup, has now been reportedly charged with money laundering, forgery, and falsification of records. The UN Special Representative for Central Africa Abou Abarry was allowed to meet with the military leaders and the deposed president. The new prime minister Raymond Ndong Sima attended a Security Council high-level meeting in New York on 20 September that discussed the situation in Ukraine.

Gabon happened to be the chair of ECCAS, the REC for the central Africa region, when the coup took place in Libreville. ECCAS suspended Gabon from all activities of the organization but stopped short of imposing sanctions on the country. The regional leaders also decided to temporarily move the ECCAS Headquarters from Libreville to Malabo until the restoration of constitutional order. The president of Equatorial Guinea

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who was the Vice-Chair of ECCAS, assumed the rotating chairmanship of the organization, and the president of the Central African Republic Faustin Touadera was appointed as ECCAS facilitator to engage with the Gabonese military leaders to restore constitutional order in that country. Subsequently, Touadera traveled to Libreville in a bid to carry out his mandate.

General Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, who is the leader of the Gabonese military government, has been on a regional tour, which took him to Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad, and recently the Democratic Republic of Congo (he is also expected to travel to Cameroon). He is doing so to request countries of the region to allow Gabon back to the regional fold and seek their support for the lifting of the suspensions imposed by the PSC. Past week, he also undertook a mission to Rwanda and Burundi where he met with the presidents of the two countries as well.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a Communiqué. The PSC may use the session as an opportunity to reiterate AU's commitment to democratic norms and principles underpinning the rejection of and zero tolerance for UCG. It may recall its previous decisions on Niger and Gabon urging the military leaders to immediately hand over power to an agreed upon transitional civilian authority and reiterate its stand in that respect. The PSC may further emphasise the importance of diplomatic engagement and mediation efforts and in that vein, urge military leaders in both countries to engage with initiatives led by the relevant regional organisations as well as the AU towards charting a proper transitional process for the restoration of constitutional order. The PSC may decide that a dedicated mechanism is established that follows on the decisions of the 1168th session and meets the requirements of the Lomé Declaration which requires that the AU Commission Chairperson deploy robust diplomatic efforts involving the establishment of engagement

with the perpetrators and enlisting of the contribution African leaders and personalities. With respect to Gabon, the PSC may reinforce the decision it adopted during its 1172nd session by calling for transfer of power by the military junta to a transitional civilian authority representative of the various political and social forces in the country and requiring that the transitional authorities specify the timeline for restoration of constitutional order. The PSC may also reiterate the need for the deployment of a high-level mission to Gabon specified under paragraph 8 of the communique of the 1172nd session which is along the lines of what is required in the Lomé Declaration.