

West African ministers tackle Mali, Guinea-Bissau crises

ABIDJAN (AFP) – West African ministers met Saturday to try to resolve the impasse gripping Mali and speed up the return to constitutional rule in Guinea-Bissau, both struggling to recover from recent military coups.

The one-day meeting of foreign ministers from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Abidjan comes a day after United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said it was “critical” that they “send a clear and principled message against unconstitutional seizures of power.”

In a statement released after the UN Security Council unanimously ordered sanctions Friday against the Guinea-Bissau coup leaders, Ban called on the military in both countries to “return to their barracks... and respect civilian authority and the rule of law.”

ECOWAS has accused the leaders of the March 22 coup in Mali of blocking its efforts to steer the country back to constitutional rule.

The regional bloc successfully mediated a transition agreement and convinced the junta to hand power to interim president Dioncounda Traore on April 12.

But the mid-level army officers who overthrew then-president Amadou Toumani Toure’s government are refusing to let Traore stay in office beyond Tuesday — the 40 days set down in the constitution as the maximum length of an interim government.

The ECOWAS deal envisioned a 12-month transition that would lead to new elections.

The regional bloc had sharp words for the coup leaders Friday after the latest round of talks failed to resolve the impasse.

“The junta itself created (this) blockage,” Ivory Coast Foreign Minister Daniel Kablan Duncan, whose country holds the rotating ECOWAS presidency, told a regional ministerial meeting.

Two lead mediators for the crisis, Burkina Faso Foreign Minister Djibrill Bassole and Ivory Coast Minister for African Integration Adama Bictogo, were expected to arrive Saturday afternoon in the Malian capital Bamako for further talks, a source close to the mediation team said.

On Friday, Mali’s parliament unanimously passed a bill granting amnesty to the coup leaders.

The bill, which must be signed by the president before becoming law, was part of the ECOWAS-mediated transition deal.

Both opponents and supporters of the coup have welcomed the amnesty.

“It’s proof that everyone wants peace,” Adama Kante, a leader in the United Front for the Defence of the Republic and Democracy (FDR), a party opposed to the coup, told AFP.

But the putschists have been ostracised by much of the international community. The spokesman for the junta, Lieutenant Amadou Konare, and his wife were denied French visas recently, a Malian diplomatic source said.

While the junta justified the coup saying the government was not doing enough to fight a rebellion by ethnic Tuareg rebels in the north, the power vacuum in Bamako has enabled Islamist and Tuareg fighters to seize a vast swathe of the vast desert north, effectively splitting the country in two.

In Guinea-Bissau, ECOWAS this week deployed the first 70 troops of a force that will eventually comprise more than 600 to oversee implementation of a one-year transition agreement to take the country to new elections after its April 12 coup.

The UN Security Council on Friday ordered a travel ban against five top military officers in the West African nation, including the powerful coup mastermind General Antonio Indjai.

Despite handing power over to a civilian government, the coup leaders are still influential, and hand-picked transitional president Manuel Serifo Mhamadjo.

Since independence from Portugal in 1974, the country's army and state have remained in constant conflict, and no president has ever completed a full term in office.

Guinea-Bissau has also become a hub for drug-running between South America and Europe.

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