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West African Leaders Spar With Togo's Army-Backed President

By REUTERS
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COTONOU, Benin, Feb. 11 (Reuters) - West African leaders on Friday summoned Togo's new president to talks in Niger on Saturday, threatening immediate sanctions if the Togolese leader did not attend.

Faure Gnassingbé was installed as president by the army just hours after his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, died a week ago. West African leaders denounced his appointment, which violated the Constitution, as a military coup. The Constitution was hastily amended to allow Mr. Gnassingbé to succeed his father and to run the country until 2008.

African leaders, Togo's former colonial ruler, France, and the United States swiftly condemned the appointment, demanding that presidential polls be held and threatening an array of sanctions.

Togo's transfer of power has dealt a blow to the declared efforts of African leaders to prove that the continent is able to govern itself and impose democratic principles.

The delegation of West African leaders had been scheduled to go to the capital, Lomé, for talks with Mr. Gnassingbé on Friday, but they canceled the trip after he decided to meet them in his northern base of Kara, close to where his father was born and was buried.

Instead, they summoned him to Niger's capital, Niamey, on Saturday to meet President Tandja Mamadou, the current chairman of the Economic Community of West African States.

The leaders "reiterated their total rejection of the coup d'état and invite the Togolese authorities once again to reverse their unconstitutional acts," they said in a statement after talks here in Benin's main city.

"If the Togolese authorities do not respond favorably to this invitation they would put themselves at risk of immediate sanctions" from the economic community, the statement said.

The leaders of Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Ghana and Benin took part in the discussions. Niger later said there would be no negotiation with the Togolese team expected in Niamey, but a reaffirmation that Togo's Constitution must be respected.

Under the original Constitution, the head of the National Assembly, Fambare Ouattara Natchaba, was supposed to take over pending elections in 60 days. Mr. Natchaba, who was out of the country when Mr. Eyadéma died, is in Benin.

Togo's government said in a statement that it had been ready to receive the delegation on Friday but that it did not arrive.

"The government reiterates that it is fully available to welcome, or meet, any friends of Togo who want to accompany it at this turning point in our political life," it said.

The statement was made at the end of a day of diplomatic sparring between Nigeria and Togo.

In a sign of his increasing isolation, Mr. Gnassingbé spent hours in Kara with government ministers and generals waiting for the African leaders to arrive, only to finally return to Lomé.

The West African leaders said they only learned that the meeting had moved to Kara when they arrived in Cotonou, and asked the Togolese to return to Lomé.

Inside the country, governed for 38 years by Mr. Eyadéma, who brooked little opposition, protests have been rare, but the police fired tear gas to disperse hundreds of people staging a demonstration in an opposition stronghold in Lomé on Friday.

Togo was gripped by political unrest in the late 1990's. Amnesty International has accused security forces of killing hundreds of people during and after an election in 1998.
