

## Army Storms Madagascan Presidency

Written by Rudi Prinsloo  
Tuesday, 17 March 2009 11:03 -

---



by Lucie Peytermann

Around 100 soldiers backed by tanks stormed the Madagascan presidency on Monday in a show of force by the military which is pressuring President Marc Ravalomanana to leave office.

The Indian Ocean state's 59-year-old leader, most of whose family left the island last week, was not inside the compound. He was hunkered down in his palace outside the city centre with the last loyal members of his 500-strong personal guard.

Opposition leader Andry Rajoelina earlier rejected Ravalomanana's offer of a referendum to decide their three-month-old feud and urged the country's security forces to arrest him for "high treason".

Soldiers wearing red berets and armed with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) surrounded the presidential compound after dusk and moved in after a military official using a loudspeaker ordered all remaining guards and staff to leave.

"We seized the presidency to hasten Ravalomanana's departure," Madagascan army chief of staff Colonel Andre Andriarijaona told AFP.

Two armoured vehicles smashed the compound's gates open and two large explosions and heavy automatic gunfire were heard inside the presidency soon after, an AFP correspondent said.

Andriarijaona said there was no immediate plan to assault the presidential palace in Iavoloha where the embattled president has taken refuge.

As the military upped the pressure, Rajoelina told thousands of supporters gathered in Antananarivo's May 13 square earlier that his three-month-old bid to unseat his rival would soon bear fruit.

"I order the security forces to execute, without delay, the measures by the minister," the firebrand 34-year-old opposition leader said, referring to an arrest warrant. "I repeat that victory is near." The warrant for high treason was announced minutes earlier on the capital's May 13 square by Christine Razanamahasoa, who was named justice minister in a parallel administration set up by Rajoelina last month.

In Brussels, the European Union warned against the violent overthrow of Ravalomanana and said it would not recognise any new leader imposed by force.

"If a new head of state is established by pure force, by military force, it is not somebody we consider," said Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency.

## Army Storms Madagascan Presidency

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

Tuesday, 17 March 2009 11:03 -

---

In Britain, junior foreign minister Mark Malloch-Brown said London was "increasingly concerned" by developments and the African Union's Peace and Security Council convened an emergency meeting on the crisis.

It "condemned all acts that lead to crises".

The president lost control of the army last week, when a military camp mutinied, arguing it was not prepared to turn its guns against the opposition or any civilians as the political feud escalated.

The rest of the country's 20,000-plus armed forces followed suit, leaving Ravalomanana more isolated than ever since the crisis erupted late last year.

In February, the presidential guard mowed down protestors, killing 28, following days of street demonstrations against Ravalomanana, who has been in power since 2002.

Army chief of staff Andriarijaona said that the army would not assault the presidential palace until the presidential guard, the last security force still loyal to Ravalomanana, agreed to step aside.

"We are against any bloodletting, so we won't go there until we obtain guarantees on the presidential guard's intentions," he explained.

A top security official, General Gilbain Pily, told AFP that several members of Ravalomanana's presidential guard had already defected.

"Members of the guard have freely reintegrated in the units in which they were trained, in the gendarmerie, police or army," Pily said.

Rajoelina, accusing his rival of being a dictator starving his people, has used his charisma and own private television station to mount a brazen challenge on the country's top office.

On Saturday, Rajoelina called on Ravalomanana to "humbly leave power in the next four hours," but as the deadline expired, the president refused to resign and accused his rival of resorting to street "terror".

Ravalomanana said in a statement Monday that Rajoelina's claim to power was illegitimate and argued that opposition to the referendum was tantamount to "supporting anarchy".

Source : Sapa-AFP /rm/ks

Date : 16 Mar 2009 23:11