Beat: Travel

Dissident Eritrean soldiers seize ministry, broadcast demands

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USPA News - Dissident Eritrean soldiers seized the information ministry in the capital of Asmara on Monday and forced state media to broadcast a call to release thousands of political prisoners, officials and experts said. Few details about the situation were released.

The situation began early in the morning when dozens of service members surrounded a building housing Eritrea`s Information Ministry in the country`s capital, Asmara. One resident said military vehicles such as tanks were involved, but there were no reports of shots being fired. The small East African nation is one of the most repressive and closed countries in the world, with all free press banned and thousands of political opponents imprisoned indefinitely. The situation gained international attention when state television went off the air at around 10 a.m. local time when a brief message was read. It is believed ERI-TV chief Asmelash Abreha was forced by dissident soldiers to read a statement on television. He said the 1997 constitution was being implemented and that all political prisoners in the country would be released. The signal was cut after just two sentences were read. The situation remained unclear throughout the day, with both state television and state radio being off the air. State television continued broadcasting on early Monday evening when it aired Sunday evening`s news bulletin. A live news program aired just after 9:30 p.m. local time and apologized for the delay, but there was no mention of the incident. Leonard Vincent, author of the book "The Eritreans" and co-founder of a France-based Eritrean radio station, said as many as 200 people were involved in the uprising. He said the Eritrean Central Bank and Asmara International Airport were possibly seized by dissident soldiers, but those reports could not be verified. Vincent on late Monday said staff members at the Information Ministry had been sent home by the dissident soldiers, who then apparently also left the area. "Several sources say the soldiers occupying the Ministry of Information in Asmara have left the building," the author and journalist said, giving no other details. There was no official statement from the Eritrean government, but Araya Desta, Eritrea`s permanent representative to the United Nations (UN), told Al Jazeera that the situation was under control. "There is no problem. Everything is quiet," he said. "Everything is going to be solved. It is all fine." Eritrea, often called the North Korea of Africa, is subject to international sanctions and has been condemned for its brutal human rights violations, which include torture and executions. The country`s state-run news agency censors all external events and the UN believes between 5,000 and 10,000 people are being held as political prisoners. Eritrea gained independence in 1991 when it broke off from Ethiopia. The country has since been ruled by 66-year-old Isaias Aferwerki.

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