

# Madagascar's armed forces gear up for war

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Madagascar's security forces are taking strategic positions in the country's capital as walls of mistrust widen between the government of President Marc Ravalomanana and the army.

Mutinying army units, which seem to have gained majority backing of all the country's security and armed forces, claimed today to have moved in tanks into strategic position in the city to ambush any moves by the president to call in 'mercenaries' into the city to protect him.

An army spokesperson told the media that the tanks had been deployed in secret places and would not be visible in the streets.

The stand-off in Madagascar, initially dismissed as a loud bubbling by the young opposition leader, Andry Rajoelina, has picked up momentum with most sectors of the country now openly in support of the anti-government calls.

President Ravalomanana has been accused by the opposition as a dictator and pushing selfish political agenda while the majority of the population struggles in abject poverty.

International and local efforts to set up peace talks have been frustrated by the pulling out of the opposition, claiming non-commitment from the government, and now the army and other security forces openly rejecting government orders to deal with the anti-government protests.

President Ravalomanana, who yesterday voiced a desperate appeal to the armed forces to stay neutral in the political turn-tables, is said to have now called on his supporters for protection if the army makes advances to his residence.

Some more than 100 people have been killed since the beginning of the year when anti-government protests resumed in the Indian Ocean Island. The political stand-off was sparked by the last year December action by government to clamp down on the private radio and Television station, owned by the sacked Mayor of Antananarivo and opposition leader, Mr Rajoelina.

The international community has warned against any coup moves in Madagascar, but all efforts to broker a peace settlement seem to have evaded as political observers now see a situation that could lead to a civil war.

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