

The Vice President / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs
Baroness Catherine Ashton
European External Action Service
1046 Brussels

Brussels, 24 January 2013

Dear Lady Ashton,

As the chair of the 'Friends of a Democratic Eritrea', an informal grouping of MEPs from different political backgrounds, I write to you about the recent unrest in that country.

On Tuesday 22nd January, news reached the outside world about the occupation of the Eritrean Ministry of Information in Asmara. Apparently the occupiers demanded the release of political prisoners in the country. It seems like an exceptional uproar in this suppressed country. Within a day, the government of Eritrea resumed power over the ministry. The international community seems unsure of how to interpret this news. Is it a coup d'état gone wrong? A spontaneous uprising? A planned spectacle? It remains unknown for the moment: information from Eritrea can only be checked through private sources and embassies, due to the absence of international press agencies in the country. But for a moment, the world was watching Eritrea, and it received the impression that things could change.

It is unclear how many soldiers were actually involved in the occupation of the Ministry of Information. Information ranges from 100 to 200 troops, possibly led by an army commander and war hero called Saleh Osman.

We fear for the fate of the soldiers involved in the uprising. What happened to them after they left - or were taken out - of the ministry? Are they imprisoned, and under what circumstances? Will they be put on trial? Knowing how political prisoners in Eritrea are treated, we fear for their lives. Would you instruct your staff in Asmara to keep themselves regularly informed about the soldiers' whereabouts and fate?

If this uproar heralds change for the better in Eritrea, the European Union should do everything in its power to support the activists inside and outside the country, through financial support of democratic forces in the diaspora, in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, and if possible, in Eritrea itself. European development funding can enable Eritrean refugees in the area to receive an education, and support independent news sources about the country. Can the European Union furthermore echo the demand made by the occupiers, namely regarding the implementation of the constitution, and release of all the country's political prisoners?

For a long time the situation in Eritrea seemed unchangeable. This week the world has seen proof of activism that could lead to change for the better. We should not let this window of opportunity pass

Yours sincerely,

Judith Sargentini

And:
Ana Gomes
Charles Tannock
Marita Ulvskog
Olle Schmidt
Alf Svensson