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NEWSDESK

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Ex-rebels hold Haitian town, seek new Army

By Joseph Guyler Delva

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Aug 31 (Reuters) - Former soldiers who helped overthrow Haiti's government patrolled the streets of a town they took over to back demands for a new Haitian Army, local media reported on Tuesday. The ex-soldiers, who formed the backbone of a rebel force that drove then-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile on Feb. 29, chased police from the southern town of Petit Goave on Saturday. In camouflage military uniforms, they spread into the streets on Tuesday trying to win the confidence of the people. The takeover of Petit Goave, about 35 miles (56 km) southeast of the capital, bore echoes of the revolt against Aristide early this year, when rebels took over one town after another in northern Haiti.

It illustrated the unrest still dogging the Caribbean country, the poorest in the Americas, under the interim government that took over from him and despite the presence of a Brazilian-led U.N. peacekeeping mission.

Haiti's interim prime minister, Gerard Latortue, sent a delegation to negotiate with the ex-rebels. But the officials were turned away by rock-throwing supporters of the soldiers.

Rebel leaders had warned Latortue weeks ago to expect trouble if his government did not reinstate Haiti's army, which was disbanded by Aristide in the mid-1990s. The ex-soldiers also say the government owes them 10 years of back pay.

Remissainthe Ravix, the leader of the former soldiers, said he is prepared to send a delegation to negotiate with the government but his men would not compromise on issues such recreating the army and paying back salaries. Many residents of Petit Goave seemed to welcome the former soldiers, shouting "down with the police, long live the army," as they attacked the government delegation.

REBEL TAKEOVER

Some Aristide supporters, however, fled Petit Goave in fear for their lives after the rebel takeover.

"It is incredibly tough for our militants, who are the principal targets for those criminals," said Sidney Claudy, a leader of Aristide's Lavalas Family party in Port-

au-Prince. "We have at least eight militants who escaped from Petit Goave who are in hiding."

Several thousand Aristide supporters took to the streets in Port-au-Prince to denounce what they called political persecution and demand the release of jailed Aristide supporters.

On Monday, France's junior foreign minister, Renaud Muselier, came under attack when gang members in the Cite Soleil slum fired at a hospital he was visiting.

A French diplomat said a Cite Soleil resident was killed in the attack but local radio reported a second person had died. Two police officers, one Haitian and one French, were wounded.

Muselier and his entourage spent about two hours inside the hospital and were able to leave only after troops from the United Nations peacekeeping force intervened with armored vehicles and a helicopter.

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