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On-The-Record Briefing On U.S.-Eritrea Relations

Jendayi Frazer, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs

Washington, DC
August 17, 2007
(9:00 a.m. EST)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, essentially, I think the purpose of this is to address: U.S.-Eritrea relations and, especially in light of certain reports that have come out recently, to include our closure of the consulate in Oakland; Somalia's activities, as indicated by the UN Monitoring Group on supplying arms and fighters into Somalia; the outstanding and continuing issues on the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, and the way ahead for resolving that; and then, of course, the domestic human rights concerns that we have, as indicated in our Human Rights Report, our annual Human Rights Report on Eritrea.

On the first issue of the consulate closing in Oakland, essentially, this is a reciprocal action because of Eritrea's continued violations of the Vienna Convention and the continued restrictions on the U.S. Embassy personnel in Asmara, which interfere with the Embassy's ability to provide consular service, including support for American citizens throughout Eritrea. On the —

QUESTION: Could you spell the town where the consulate is?

QUESTION: Oakland, California.

QUESTION: Like Oakland? (Laughter.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Oakland, California.

QUESTION: Yeah, they also closed the one in Auckland.

QUESTION: Oh, I'm sorry, okay. Oh, I'm sorry, I gotcha, okay.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: On the Vienna Convention, essentially, Eritrea continues to use — to illegally detain Embassy diplomatic pouch bags and refuse to provide visas to temporary duty diplomatic support personnel for the last two years. We've consistently protested these restrictions to the Eritrean Government and requested that they be lifted, but the government has refused to address our concerns. And so we're taking this action as reciprocal action. It does not mean that we are, in any way, PNGing Eritrean diplomats. They can, in fact, relocate to Washington, D.C. to the Eritrean Embassy in Washington, D.C.

But I thought it was especially important to say clearly the purpose of our action, especially for the more than — or, approximately 200,000 Eritreans who are living in the United States, so that they could understand that this is not a signal, in any way, that the United States has problems with Eritreans living in our country. And, in fact, they can continue to get services from their embassy here in Washington, D.C. But it was important for us to acknowledge that Eritrea is restricting our diplomats, and to treat them reciprocally.

QUESTION: Do you want to go through the whole thing, or should we just do — ask questions about each one and then as —

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: If you want to ask questions, that's fine. I was going to go through the whole thing, but I know that the time is short. So if you want to ask questions on —

QUESTION: Why don't we just go through the whole thing?

QUESTION: Okay.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Okay. So that's on the first issue. On the — Eritrea's activities in Somalia, the UN Monitoring Group report clearly indicates that Eritrea has played a key role in financing, funding and arming the terror and insurgency activities which are taking place in Somalia, and is the primary source of support for that insurgency and

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terror activities. And this, of course, is — completely undermines the work that the international community is doing to try to facilitate the National Reconciliation Congress; try to facilitate dialogue, both social and political, so that we can move forward on the processes set out by the Transitional Federal Charter, that would result in elections in 2009.

So it disrupts the political process, which is a solution to the problem in Somalia. But also, the impact on civilian lives is acute, with roadside bombings, with the political assassinations of more moderate elements within Somalia who are trying to serve as a bridge between communities. And so, clearly, this fundamentally undermines American policy, especially as Eritrea is also supporting the Al-Shabab militia, which used to be with the defunct Council of Islamic Courts, which has terror elements within it.

So that's on their activity. So we welcome the UN Monitoring Group report. And, of course, we'll continue to work with neighboring countries, the international countries, to try to convince Eritrea that this activity has to end, and is actually destabilizing not only Somalia, but all of the region as a whole; the Horn of Africa.

On the Eritrea-Ethiopia boundary issue, we are pleased that both countries have agreed to meet again under the auspices of the EEBC, under the Boundary Commission. And they're working very closely with Norway. And we would expect the UN to play a role also in this next meeting.

So we think that the process perhaps will move forward on there, but both countries, Ethiopia and Eritrea, have violated their own responsibilities to solving the Boundary Commission, the boundary dispute. And it continues to be a source of tension that is undermining not only the two countries, but, again, the region as a whole.

And then finally on the human rights report, I especially point out our concern with the Eritrean Government's kidnapping essentially and holding in detention the family members of those who refuse national service in Eritrea. We are also, of course, quite concerned that the country has never had an election. It had its referendum and never went to election. It's basically a one-party authoritarian state. And we would hope that the Eritrean diaspora would be able to influence that government because it is the source of significant remittances. In fact, there's a two percent tax on the income of Eritreans living abroad to try to influence that government to open up to end the human rights violations and to move towards a more democratic governing, you know, through elections and other means. And so that's essentially the points.

QUESTION: So you got a lot of problems with them.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: We have a lot of problems with them.

QUESTION: What are you going to do to --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: And they have a lot of -- they're creating a lot of problems in Africa.

QUESTION: Are you considering any kind of action beyond the closure of the consulate; any kind of action vis-à-vis Eritrea that will manifest your unhappiness at all of these -- on the border dispute with the others, anyway?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, we've tried our best to act with restraint with Eritrea. You know, the deterioration of the relationship goes back even before this administration. So it goes back before 2001. We've watched them throw out USAID. We've watched them take the food out of the warehouses of UN organizations. They've been carrying out these types of disruptive activities for some time. And we've actually tried our best through diplomatic means -- talking to their ambassador here and our ambassador talking to the government officials in Eritrea -- to convince them that their activities are escalating in a negative direction. We think it's a fairly significant action to close the consulate in Oakland. And absolutely we are considering additional steps, if necessary, to try to prevent their activity, especially vis-à-vis Somalia.

QUESTION: Such as?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, we'll -- I mean, we're very much working with the regional countries. You know, the UN Monitoring Group is obviously bringing to light their activities. We're urging Italy and Norway, countries that continue to have regular contact with the Eritrean Government, to speak to the senior officials, including the President. And so right now it's through persuasion.

QUESTION: Are you considering additional bilateral steps?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Or through the UN?

QUESTION: Yeah.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, we're certainly going to consider additional bilateral steps. We're not trying to move towards a fundamental break in our relationship, and we do believe that the activity of closing their consulate is a major signal to the government of our seriousness in terms of the activities that they're carrying out in Somalia.

QUESTION: I have to ask a couple of questions on each one. First, why Oakland? Do they have any other consulates or -- why this one? Why?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, this is where they do their consular services. And to the degree that they're preventing us from doing our consular activities in Asmara, we thought that this would be the appropriate reciprocal action.

QUESTION: Do they have another?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Not that I know of --

QUESTION: Okay.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: -- Oakland.

QUESTION: But you never -- it -- Eritrea is the size of a postage stamp, basically, and there are quite a few Eritreans living in Oakland. I mean, there is an inconvenience to these people. There's also -- was any part of it the financial aspect of it, the two percent that they pay can't be collected there now. So is that part of -- did that go into your thinking when you were closing it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, we were thinking, as I said, that our American citizens are significantly impacted by the lack of our ability to provide them consular services as well, so it was absolutely a reciprocal action. And it certainly does -- I believe it certainly will impact their ability to collect money from the Eritrean community and the United States which, after all, that money is being used to, as a UN monitoring report has indicated, to get weapons and to train fighters to go into Somalia.

QUESTION: And how many Americans are there in Eritrea outside the Embassy?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: I'm not sure of it. What's --

PARTICIPANT: Seven?

MR. MCMULLEN: Four hundred.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Four hundred.

QUESTION: Four hundred? And most of them are aid workers?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Yeah, go ahead.

MR. MCMULLEN: Eritrean Americans.

QUESTION: That's our Ambassador.

QUESTION: Eritrean Americans?

MR. MCMULLEN: Eritrean Americans.

QUESTION: On Somalia and on the bilateral steps, why not go ahead and put them on the State Sponsors list?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: We're looking into it.

QUESTION: And how advanced --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: What you have to do to put a country on the State Sponsor list is to have the -- to put together the dossier, the case against them. And so, certainly, that information is being collected right now. It will be evaluated through an interagency process and then decisions will be taken. But it's not based on political -- a political decision, it's not -- it's purely based on an assessment, a true evaluation of the data. And so we are certainly collecting that data and this human monitoring report will certainly be part of that. But, you know, we have to do our independent verification. I mean, we do have intelligence that affirms what's in the monitoring report, but we are still in the process of collecting that data. And, you know, it's an opportunity before they are put on the State Sponsor list for them to change their behavior.

QUESTION: Well, I mean, you -- as you know, putting a country on a State Sponsors list brings along a whole set of sanctions. If they don't -- obviously you're trying to make the case so that you can put them on, but if they don't kind of make the cut, so to speak, are you considering sanctions along the lines without the kind of formal, legal designation?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Frankly, the information so far that we've collected is fairly convincing about their activities, in terms of State Sponsor, in Eritrea and in Somalia. So we haven't looked at sanctions independent of that designation and what would come with it.

QUESTION: Is there a second one, though? It sounds like you're expecting --

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Now that's -- what I'm saying is that if they stop their behavior, we're not looking to go down this route. But if they continue their behavior and we put together the file that's necessary, I think it would be fairly convincing.

QUESTION: Are you doing anything to disrupt the flow of arms?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: We haven't done anything other than our intelligence assistance with neighboring countries, diplomatically working with neighboring countries, trying to stop that flow and as well as communicating with the Eritrean Government that they -- you know, it's an unacceptable practice and behavior. But we haven't tried to

any -- you know, from an international process and someone can be prevented from intercept any ships that are coming in or anything like that.

QUESTION: So I'm just slightly confused. So you say you don't want to go down this route, but you are looking at it? So it's right to say you are considering putting Eritrea on the State Sponsor list?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: It is right to say that we are considering that if they continue their behavior and if we get the file that -- you know, through the evidence, that -- you know, we can go through our interagency process and make that determination. That determination hasn't been made at this point, but it is absolutely part of the consideration. And the primary reason is not because of U.S. relations with Eritrea, but because of what's going on in Somalia.

QUESTION: What about their support -- continued support for JEM and the other Darfur groups? And also, they do seem to have played a somewhat positive role in the west -- in eastern Sudan. They did get -- they did broker the -- or host, at least, the peace talks with the eastern front. So is it all bad?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: It's not all bad. It is bad, but it's not all bad. Eritrea is a major player on Sudan, but again, they're a major player because they're sponsoring and supporting the rebel groups.

QUESTION: So they're a major player, but for the wrong reasons?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Yes. And we, of course, want those rebel groups to come to the negotiating table. As we have said many times, the Government of Sudan is primarily responsible for what's going on in Darfur, but the rebels themselves are also attacking civilians and are a part of the problem in Darfur. And so to the degree that Eritrea can deliver those rebels to the table, that's a good thing and we want to work with Eritrea. But they're doing it by effectively destabilizing Sudan, because they're paying for rebels who are part of the process of destabilizing that country.

QUESTION: But once the --

QUESTION: Is it -- do you think that your support -- well, you want to finish Sudan, because I have a question on --

QUESTION: Mine's a simple thing: Are they actually trying to get the rebels to the table?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: They have.

QUESTION: Have the Eritreans been told that you're looking at State Sponsor designation, or is this how they're going to find out?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: They've been told through private channels.

QUESTION: Private, non-official channels?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Yes.

QUESTION: The other thing is that I noticed on my favorite website, Shabeh.com, that Isaias is supposed to be speaking to the -- going to give a -- basically what you're doing today -- today. And I -- just before I came out here, I looked to see that it hadn't come -- it hadn't been posted yet. Do you have any idea what he's going to -- what he might be saying?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: No idea. I hope that what he would say is that Eritrea values its relationship with the United States and will look to improve it and will also stop any activities that are destabilizing Somalia. That's what I would hope he would say, but I have no idea what he will say.

QUESTION: Do you think --

QUESTION: Right. And the -- just one last thing, have you sought, since your attempt to visit -- when was that, two -- almost two years ago, or a year and a half ago, have you sought and been denied a visa?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: No, I wasn't denied a visa then either. What the Eritrean Government said was that they did not want me to go to the border. My plan was to go to the border through Asmara and then to go to Ethiopia. The Eritreans gave me a visa and said, you're welcome to come to the country, but do not go to the border. I said, the only purpose of coming is to go to the border. And so I went through Ethiopia instead of Eritrea. So I have not sought a visa since that time.

QUESTION: Okay. And my last question is that Eritrea was -- when they expelled the -- certain people of certain nationalities from UNMEE from Eritrea, has that ever been adequately addressed and is the -- is there still concern that this is going to lead to a precedent, that they might be telling the Sudanese, hey, look, this is a way that you can affect the hybrid force, we did it, they couldn't -- the UN was toothless, they couldn't do anything?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, that's another issue. When I say that we've tried to act with restraint because at the time that they rejected the UNMEE, pushed out the UNMEE officials from -- I think it was non-African UNMEE officials, we were asked to come in by Kofi Annan before conditions would be placed on Eritrea and Ethiopia to try to mediate

...of not having before sanctions would be placed on Eritrea and Ethiopia to try to resolve between them, to try to make -- get forward motion on the boundary commission. We did get forward motion because we brought Ethiopia back to the table. Ethiopia had refused to go to the commission before. We brought them back to the table. We got Meles to say that he would accept a delimitation decision without conditions. But we lost Eritrea. Eritrea then walked away from the boundary commission discussions. Now they're coming back together.

Those sanctions which were being considered were put on hold to give time for a diplomatic effort. Our diplomatic effort stalled when we suggested that there be technology, satellite technology, to look at how decisions on the demarcation of that border would affect the local communities. Because we felt that it was extremely important for Ethiopia and Eritrea to discuss how they were going to manage the impact on communities on the border because some territory that was previously Eritrea's would go to Ethiopia, some territory that was previously Ethiopia would go to Eritrea. So you had to address those local issues. Some farms would be split from their wells. Eritrea felt that that might be trying to undo the delimitation decision.

And so, no, to answer your question, no sanctions were taken against them. That's still an outstanding issue and we're still hoping that diplomacy will work.

QUESTION: It's more than two years, though.

QUESTION: How much do you think that your growing ties with Ethiopia and your support for Ethiopia and Somalia, the Ethiopian military in Somalia, is kind of fueling the relationship?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Well, our ties aren't growing with Ethiopia. We've always had very strong ties with Ethiopia. I mean, historically, we've had very strong ties with Ethiopia and we don't in any way financially support the Ethiopian military in Somalia. In fact, I've said many times that we urged the Ethiopian military not to go into Somalia. They did so because of their own national interests, their own national security interests.

What we're trying to do is, in fact, help the Ethiopians to withdraw from Somalia by working to get AMISOM forces into Somalia to replace the Ethiopians. We think it's extremely important for them to draw down as quickly as possible, and they think it's important for them to draw down as quickly as possible, or at least that's what they tell us.

And so our relations with Ethiopia have always been strong. I think that, you know, my own discussions with the previous ambassador to the United States is that, as I said, the U.S.-bilateral relationship with Eritrea was already problematic before this administration came into office from, you know, before 2000 -- 1998, 1999. This the Eritreans took as a signal the national security council strategy which said that the United States recognized certain strategic countries -- we didn't say partners, but strategic countries -- based on their size, their, you know, use of peacekeeping forces. Those countries were Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia.

And I think that from what the former ambassador told me, Eritrea took that as a signal that perhaps we were favoring Ethiopia over Eritrea. It wasn't the case, but Eritrea then quickly after, for independent reasons, kicked out USAID and put us on a path that we have tolerated, including restricting our mission personnel. But what we cannot tolerate is their support for terror activity, particularly in Somalia.

QUESTION: Technically, when does the closure of the Oakland consulate take effect?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: November 9th, 90 days. We gave them 90 -- November 8th. I'm sorry. We gave them 90 days.

QUESTION: Why did you decide to close the consulate and not to take what might be seen as a more reciprocal action of acting against their embassy in Washington? Was that a manifestation of your effort to exercise restraint?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: No, we've already done that. We've put -- we've not tried to escalate this. We said, look, you're putting the restrictions on our personnel. We put 25-kilometer restrictions on their personnel in Washington as well and in Oakland. It didn't change their behavior, and so now we're taking another step, which is you're also impacting our consular services, we will impact your consular services.

QUESTION: Can you explain to me the link between -- you said that they had been detaining diplomatic pouches and they had been refusing to grant visas to TDY personnel. That has interfered with your consular services in Eritrea why? Because consular officials couldn't get in or because you couldn't transfer passports or whatever --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: That's right. That's right. And they're not detaining our pouches. They've insisted on inspecting them, which is against the Vienna Convention. And because they insisted on inspecting them, we can't send them forward because we won't allow our material to be inspected in that way which has obviously sensitive personnel information in them.

QUESTION: One more thing on the food you talked about. I was under the impression, and I just got back in March from two years in Nairobi and I covered this pretty closely, that it wasn't that they were taking the food, it's that they were locking it up and keeping it there

and they weren't distributing it to anyone.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: No, we've seen --

QUESTION: Has that changed?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Yeah. There's reports that they've not only -- they warehoused the food, but then they've -- we've seen that food come on to the market.

QUESTION: Oh, so they're selling it?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER: Yes, now they're selling it.

QUESTION: I see.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

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