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US considers terror label for Eritrea

By Matthew Lee, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — The Bush administration is preparing a case to designate the Red Sea state of Eritrea a "state sponsor of terrorism" for its alleged support of al-Qaida-linked Islamist militants in Somalia, the top U.S. diplomat for Africa said Friday.

Officials are now compiling evidence of Eritrean backing for the extremists to support the designation, a rare move that would impose severe sanctions on the impoverished nation and put it in the same pariah category as Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria, said Jendayi Frazer, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs.

"We have to put together the case against them, that information is being collected right now," Frazer said. "The information so far that we've collected is fairly convincing about their activities in terms of 'state sponsor' in Somalia."

"It will be evaluated through an interagency process and then decisions will be taken," she said, without providing a timeline. She said Eritrea had been informed of the possible action "through private channels."

Frazer, speaking at a briefing called to discuss deteriorating relations between the United States and the increasingly authoritarian country, said Washington agreed with a recent report by U.N. experts that found Eritrea to be the primary source of weapons and cash for Islamist insurgents in Somalia.

"We do have intelligence that affirms what's in the monitoring report," she said, adding that while the information is being collected Eritrea has a chance to change its behavior and avoid the designation. "What we cannot tolerate is their support for terror activity, particularly in Somalia."

The U.N. report, obtained by The Associated Press last month before its official release, says the Islamist insurgents in Somalia have enough surface-to-air missiles, suicide vests and explosives to sustain their war against the internationally backed Somali government, largely due to secret shipments from Eritrea.

It says Eritrea has shipped a "huge quantity of arms" to the insurgents, known as the Shabab. The shipments continued despite U.N. efforts to bring peace to Somalia and the deployment of African Union peacekeepers.

Eritrean officials could not immediately be reached for comment on Friday but they have repeatedly denied providing any assistance to the Shabab, the militant wing of an Islamic group that ruled much of southern Somalia for six months last year until Eritrea's arch-foe Ethiopia invaded in December and ousted them.

U.S. officials believe the militants have close ties to al-Qaida and are harboring several suspects wanted for the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

The "state sponsor of terrorism" designation is rarely used and represents a near death sentence for diplomatic relations with the United States. Washington maintains a diplomatic presence in three of the countries now on the list — Cuba, Sudan and Syria — but does not have an ambassador in any of them.

Those on the list are banned from receiving all non-emergency U.S. aid and subject to a host of financial sanctions. It also penalizes people, firms and third countries that engage in trade with designees.

The last country added was Sudan in 1993 and only two countries have been removed from the list: Iraq after the

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U.S.-led invasion and ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Libya last year after it renounced terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Ties between the United States and Eritrea have steadily declined in recent years with U.S. officials complaining of Eritrea playing a destabilizing role in the Horn of Africa through its continued animosity with regional foe Ethiopia, its activities in Somalia and support for rebels in Sudan.

At the same time, Washington accuses Asmara of clamping down on internal dissent, hindering the work of aid workers and interfering with U.S. diplomatic work in the country. Earlier this month, the State Department ordered the closure of Eritrea's consulate in Oakland, Calif., in retaliation for curbs placed on U.S. diplomats in Eritrea.

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