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US to Close Eritrean Consulate Amid Diplomatic Dispute

By
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The State Department said Friday it has ordered Eritrea to close its consulate in Oakland, California amid U.S. charges the East African country is aiding rebels in Somalia. Officials say additional punitive measures are being considered, including the possible listing of Eritrea as a state sponsor of terrorism. VOA's David Gollust reports from the State Department.

The Bush administration has given Eritrea 90 days to close the diplomatic mission in Oakland in a tangible expression of U.S. concern over Eritrean behavior in Somalia, and interference with activities of the American embassy in Asmara.

In a briefing for reporters, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer said the consulate closure, to take effect in November, is reciprocal action for Eritrean violations of the Vienna convention on diplomatic conduct.

She said tensions with Eritrea that pre-date the Bush administration have been escalating, with that country refusing to grant visas to U.S. officials assigned to the Asmara embassy for temporary duty, and demanding to inspect U.S. diplomatic pouches.

That comes against a background of concern about the Eritrean activity in Somalia, where a new report from United Nations monitors says Eritrea has played a key role in financing and arming insurgents fighting the Somali interim government.

Frazer said the United States is not expelling any Eritrean diplomats, and that Eritreans in the United States can still receive consular services from the country's embassy in Washington. But she also made clear that additional measures are possible if Eritrean behavior does not change.

"We're certainly going to consider additional bilateral steps," she said. "We're not trying to move towards a fundamental break in our relationship. 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 they are carrying out in Somalia."

Frazer said one option for follow-on action would be listing Eritrea as a state sponsor of terrorism, an action that would automatically trigger wide-ranging U.S. aid curbs and other sanctions against the Asmara government.

She made clear the Bush administration is not eager to take such a drastic step but said information from the U.N. and elsewhere that Eritrea is helping foment terrorism in Somalia is, in her words, "fairly convincing."

"We are collecting that data. And this U.N. monitoring report will certainly be part of that, but we have to do our independent verification. We do have intelligence that affirms what is in the monitoring report but we are still in the process of collecting that data. And, you know, it is an opportunity, before they are put on the state sponsor list, for them to change their behavior."

Frazer said U.S. officials believe that taxes on the earnings of the estimated 200,000 Eritreans living in the United States, collected by the Oakland consulate, have been used to finance weapons and training for insurgents in Somalia.

She said Eritrean assistance has been going to, among others, the al-Shabab militias - remnants of the radical Islamic Courts Union which ran the most of country last year until being ousted by Ethiopian troops and the U.N.-recognized transitional administration.

The chief U.S. African policy official said the United States had urged the Ethiopian military not to enter Somalia at the end of last year, and continues to work diplomatically to help field an east African peacekeeping force to replace the Ethiopians.

Source: VOA

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