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Eritrea lashes out at US over consulate closure

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August 13, 2007 (ASMARA) — The United States said on Monday it had ordered closed an Eritrean consulate, which Asmara called the latest "unjust and unfriendly" U.S. action in a worsening diplomatic relationship.

Eritrea routinely denounces the United States for its support of Ethiopia, with whom Asmara is locked in a bitter dispute over the Horn of African nations' shared border.

The United States and the United Nations accuse Eritrea of funneling weapons to Islamist insurgents in Mogadishu fighting the Ethiopian-backed Somali interim government.

A U.S. embassy official in Asmara who spoke on condition of anonymity said the Eritrean consulate in Oakland, California, last week was given 90 days to close down, in response to restrictions placed on the embassy in Eritrea.

"For the past year the U.S. has been trying to work with the government of Eritrea to address these restrictions that have impeded our ability to operate," the official said.

"Since they have been unwilling to engage with us, we have taken these actions in response to these restrictions."

The U.S. official said the constraints included interference with diplomatic pouches, travel restrictions for embassy personnel and the refusal to grant visas.

Already, the U.S. embassy in Asmara closed its visa section in February for what it said were similar difficulties.

But Eritrea dismissed the U.S. allegations and said it had respected its diplomatic treaty obligations.

"I have no explanation for this. If you look at U.S. policy in the last two years, we have seen a pattern of unfriendly and unjust acts against Eritrea," Yemane Ghebremeskel, a senior government official, told Reuters.

He did not say whether Asmara would take reciprocal action.

Eritrea's diaspora community is an important source of revenue for the cash-strapped Red Sea state. Economists estimate remittances total from 30 percent to 70 percent of the nation's annual gross domestic product.

Eritrean government editorials routinely decry the United States for supporting Ethiopia, calling Washington "despicable."

(Reuters)

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