

Diplomat questioned over 'spying' in Eritrea

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One of Africa's most repressive regimes has prevented a British diplomat from leaving the country and arrested two local employees of the British Council.

Eritrea is locked in military confrontation with neighbouring Ethiopia over a disputed border. The diplomat serves at the British Embassy in Ethiopia - which may have aroused the suspicion of the Eritrean authorities - and was on a routine visit to Eritrea's capital, Asmara. He tried to leave the country on Saturday, but was prevented from doing so. Since then he has been questioned by Eritrea's security agencies, who apparently suspect him of being a spy. He is not believed to have been taken into custody. A Foreign Office spokesman said only that "our dealings with the Eritrean government are confidential". The British Council in London confirmed that two of its Eritrean employees in Asmara have been arrested. The first was held for questioning for several days and then freed. On Monday, the most senior Eritrean employee of the British Council was arrested at the office in Asmara. He is still in custody. "We are concerned about his welfare and we are working with the Eritrean authorities to secure his early release," said a British Council spokesman. He added that a "misunderstanding" appeared to explain the two arrests. Like all other such offices around the world, the British Council in Eritrea is installing new satellite communications to provide secure internet access. This may have aroused the suspicion of the authorities. Eritrea is dominated by President Isaias Afewerki's dictatorial regime. The Red Sea state has fewer than five million people, yet it maintains armed forces almost 300,000 strong. Mr Isaias tolerates no dissent and his regime has jailed more journalists than any other government in Africa. "The repression of journalists is symptomatic of the Eritrean government's appalling attitude towards democracy and a sign that it cares little for human rights," said the International Press Institute in an open letter of protest over Mr Isaias's suppression of the media yesterday. Eritrea's regime is also deeply suspicious of foreign governments. Mr Isaias is believed to have infiltrated some 3,000 troops into a neutral buffer zone along the border with Ethiopia. He has imposed restrictions on a United Nations force charged with monitoring this highly sensitive area. Observers fear these moves could be the prelude to a new war with Ethiopia, which illegally occupies several slices of Eritrean territory, including the bitterly disputed town of Badme. The last border war between the two rivals ended in 2000 after costing 70,000 lives.