

Analysts say Eritrea is Not Supporting al-Shabab

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The International Crisis Group has dismissed alleged links between Eritrea and Somali insurgent group al-Shabab following calls from an United States lawmaker to designate the country a state sponsor of terrorism.

In a letter sent Tuesday, U.S. Congressman Ed Royce advised Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to add Eritrea to the country's list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.

The letter was sent following a July 11 terrorist attack in Kampala, Uganda that killed at least 76 people, including one American. Somali Islamist group al-Shabab has claimed responsibility for the bombings.

The group, which is loosely affiliated with al-Qaida, explained the attack was in retaliation for Ugandan Peacekeeping troops in Somalia supporting the U.N.-backed government.

Royce, the lead Republican on the Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives, said Eritrea's support of al-Shabab was "well documented," and urged Secretary Clinton to take action before the group begins targeting the United States.

There is evidence Eritrea has provided support to Somali insurgents in the past, but the Director of the International Crisis Group in Nairobi, E.J. Hogendoorn, says that support was aimed at groups fighting Ethiopian forces. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after a 30-year civil war and the two nations have maintained a tense peace since.

According to Hogendoorn, that support was not aimed at terrorism or given to al-Shabab fighters.

"There is very little evidence to suggest that Eritrea has, or is currently, supporting al-Shabab. In the past Eritrea has supported certain insurgencies in Somalia in an effort to continue its proxy war with Ethiopia. The evidence we have seen so far suggests that support for Hizbul Islam, rather than al-Shabab. While we are concerned about the activities of Hizbul Islam, there is no evidence to suggest that Hizbul Islam supports terrorist acts against neighboring states," said Hogendoorn/

Hizbul Islam, like al-Shabab, is battling Somalia's Transitional Federal Government to create an Islamic State on the Horn of Africa. But Hizbul Islam controls relatively little territory in Somalia and is considered a much less significant threat than the al-Shabab forces.

And, according to Hogendoorn, evidence suggests that Eritrea withdrew its support of the group in 2009.

While al-Shabab has made threats against the United States in the past, the analyst also

told VOA the group posed a much greater threat to the security and stability of east Africa than to the interests of the United States.

Congressman Royce previously voiced concern about Eritrea's terrorist connections in 2009. The representative introduced an amendment affirming that the country's support of Somali insurgents posed a direct threat to the U.S., which was voted down in the U.S. Congress.

If added, Eritrea would be subject to a variety of sanctions including diplomatic isolation, economic restrictions and weapons embargoes. The country would become the fifth state to receive the designation, joining Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria on the list.