

UK warns Eritrea over detained British nationals

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Britain warned Eritrea on Tuesday it would take "robust action" if it was not granted consular access to four UK nationals held in the African country since December.

Foreign minister Henry Bellingham said Britain had received no information about the four men detained on December 24 by the Eritrean navy in an apparent dispute over the non-payment of fuel.

British media reports have said four ex-Royal Marines were arrested after a gun battle as they guarded a merchant ship from pirates in the Indian Ocean.

Bellingham said consular access to check on the men's welfare should have been granted within 48 hours under the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations, signed by both Britain and Eritrea.

"That we should not have received any response at all from the Eritrean authorities after nearly four months is deeply troubling," Bellingham told parliament.

Britain requested a telephone call with Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki over the matter last month but had yet to receive a formal response, Bellingham said.

"In the event that President Isaias does not agree to a telephone call, or it does not result in consular access being granted, the foreign secretary (William Hague) will write to him to reiterate our request and to make clear that we take Eritrea's non-compliance with the Vienna Convention very seriously and we will look to take tough measures in response if necessary," he said.

Bellingham did not specify the measures, but said Hague was "looking at exactly what additional tough robust action we can take."

Eritrea is one of the world's most secretive nations and has frosty relations with a number of western countries as well as most of its neighbours, having been involved in border disputes with Ethiopia and Djibouti.

(Reuters)