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UN Investigator: Too Early to Lift Eritrean Sanctions

by VOA News

The head of the United Nations monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea says it is too early to lift U.N. sanctions against Eritrea, despite a report suggesting the Asmara government no longer actively supports Somali al-Shabab insurgents.

U.N. coordinator Matt Bryden told VOA Tuesday, "While we've seen some improvement, I don't think we see enough and we suggest that it will be too early to lift sanctions."

The Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Eritrea and Somalia in 2009, on concerns that officials were providing financial assistance and weapons to al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab insurgents. Eritrea has repeatedly denied the charges.

Bryden's call for caution comes just hours after Eritrea's U.N. envoy said existing sanctions should be lifted. The envoy cited a pending U.N. report that says investigators found no evidence of Eritrean support for armed groups in Somalia in the past year.

The U.N. report, seen by VOA, attributes the reduction in Eritrean support to enhanced international monitoring and al-Shabab's battlefield failures.

Bryden also said Somali officials linked in the report to the alleged theft of public funds could be hit with U.N. sanctions prohibiting travel and freezing foreign assets. "It's quite possible that some of those named in the report will eventually be designated. But this decision is for the Council and its member states. When the final version of the report is released [in a few days], there will be evidence in the public domain," he said.

Somalia has not had a fully-functioning government since 1991. Armed militias held power in Mogadishu until August 2011, when African Union and Somali government troops pushed al-Shabab militants out of the capital.

The U.N.-backed government that took over barely operates outside the city. Its U.N. mandate expires August 20.