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Iran Resumes Mass Trial of Activists and Protesters

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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TEHRAN, Iran (AP) -- A young French academic and local staff of the British and French embassies stood trial Saturday with dozens of Iranian opposition figures and confessed to being involved in the country's postelection unrest.

Iran's opposition and rights groups have condemned the trial as a sham and say such confessions are coerced and scripted. Britain, which seemed caught off guard by the appearance of its embassy employee, called it an outrage, while France demanded the immediate release of its citizen.

Saturday's second hearing at Tehran's Revolutionary Court involved a new group of detainees and focused on testimony from the French academic and the two other foreign-linked defendants, demonstrating the government's resolve to taint Iran's pro-reform movement as a tool of foreign countries -- particularly Britain and the United States.

The prosecutor accused the two countries of fomenting the unrest in an attempt to engineer a "soft overthrow" of the government.

The French academic and the two embassy employees took turns standing at a podium in the large, wood-paneled courtroom to make confessions before a judge seated between two large portraits for Iran's supreme leader and the Islamic Republic's founder.

The French Embassy employee, Nazak Afshar, cried as she admitted she was involved in postelection disturbances. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue and said that "brothers at the Intelligence Ministry made me understand my mistake," the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

Such confessions -- whether coerced or not -- have become the centerpiece of Iran's mass trial of more than 100 prominent opposition figures and activists, which began a week ago.

The defendants are accused of crimes including rioting, spying and plotting to overthrow the regime during the massive street demonstrations denouncing the official results of the June 12 election.

The prosecutor read out an indictment at Saturday's session that accuses Britain and the U.S. of planning to rouse the unrest with the aim of toppling Iran's Islamic rulers through a "soft overthrow," the IRNA news agency reported. The indictment also accused the two powers of providing financial assistance to Iran's reformists to undermine hard-line ruling clerics.

Hossein Rassam, a political analyst at the British Embassy who was arrested shortly after the election, told

the court that Britain was involved in fomenting the unrest, according to IRNA.

He said a budget of 300,000 pounds -- or about \$500,000 -- had been allocated to establish contacts with Iranian political groups, influential individuals and activists, IRNA reported.

The news agency quoted him as saying that he established contacts before the election with the campaign headquarters of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the pro-reform candidate who says he was robbed of victory through fraud.

"My main responsibility was to gather information from Tehran and other cities by setting up contacts with individuals and influential parties and political groups and to send reports to London. ... The British Embassy, due to its hostile policies in Iran and fear of exposure of its contacts inside Iran, employed local staff to establish such contacts. I established such contacts based on orders from embassy officials," IRNA quoted Rassam as saying.

Rassam has been charged with espionage and "acting against national security," IRNA reported.

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband condemned the trial and said the British government had raised the matter with the Iranian ambassador in London and Iran's deputy foreign minister.

"Hossein is a member of our staff going about his legitimate duties," Miliband said in a statement. It added that the trial against him and other embassy staff "only brings further discredit to the Iranian regime."

An earlier Foreign Office statement said Rassam's appearance in court was an outrage and contradicted assurances from senior Iranian officials.

Eight other British Embassy staffers arrested along with Rassam were released after about a week in custody.

Seated in the front row of the courtroom with a scarf over her hair was 24-year-old French academic Clotilde Reiss, who was reportedly arrested July 1 at Tehran airport.

According to IRNA, she told the court that she made a mistake by attending a demonstration.

"I had personal motives for joining gatherings to see what was happening out of curiosity but I admit that I made a mistake and should not have attended," IRNA quoted her as saying.

Reiss has been charged with acting against national security by joining protests, gathering information, taking photos and sending them abroad.

The French Foreign Ministry on Saturday called for the immediate release of both Reiss and embassy employee Afshar, saying that the charges against them were without basis.

The ministry statement also objected to the conditions under which Reiss and Afshar were being tried, and "deplored" that neither woman was represented by a lawyer.

Sweden, which holds the rotating presidency of the [European Union](#), expressed concern over the trials and noted that actions against one EU country -- citizen or embassy staff -- is considered action against all EU

member states.

Iranian defendants appearing Saturday included Ali Tajernia, a former reformist lawmaker; Shahaboddin Tabatabaei, a prominent leader of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, Iran's largest reformist political party; and Ahmad Zeidabadi, an outspoken journalist opposing hard-liners.

A reformist Web site said riot police attacked family members of the defendants and others gathered in front of the court to denounce the trial.

Associated Press Writers Raphael G. Satter contributed to this report from London, Elaine Ganley from Paris.

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