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Outrage at Iran's trial of embassy worker

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By Joe Churcher and Tim Moynihan

A DECISION by the authorities in Tehran to put a senior British embassy worker on trial "brings further discredit on the Iranian regime", Foreign Secretary David Miliband said last night.

Amid urgent talks between Britain and Iran, Miliband said Hossein Rassam had simply been "going about his legitimate duties".

The embassy's chief political analyst, who is Iranian, was among defendants in court at the start of a mass trial of individuals

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accused of inciting anti-government unrest following last month's disputed presidential election.

Miliband said: "I am deeply concerned by the unjustified charges today laid against Hossein Rassam in Tehran.

Iranian action against him, and those against Clotilde Reiss and a member of the staff of the French embassy in Tehran only brings further discredit on the Iranian regime.

"Our ambassador has raised our concerns today with the Iranian deputy foreign minister, and the FCO Political Director, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, with the Iranian ambassador in London."

Reiss is a French academic and Miliband said European nations were united in their opposition to the move.

"We are in close contact with our European and other international partners: I have spoken today to French foreign minister (Bernard] Kouchner and to Swedish foreign minister (Carl] Bildt in his capacity as EU president," he said.

"We have reaffirmed our solidarity in the face of this latest Iranian provocation."

Rassam was one of nine officials arrested in the wake of the protests against the re-election of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He was the last to be released – on bail of around £60,000 – and the only one to face charges, reported to be of espionage and harming national security.

Iran has blamed Britain, along with the US and other foreign powers, of stirring dissent and actively fomenting the demonstrations, which continue despite brutal crackdowns. A prosecutor told the court the two countries were bent on a "soft overthrow", it was reported.

Foreign journalists were barred from attending the proceedings in Tehran, but the state-run Islamic Republic

News Agency (IRNA) reported what it said was Rassam's testimony. Embassy staff had been ordered to be present in the riots, he was said to have told the court, alongside two diplomats named as Tom Burn and Paul Blemey.

The Foreign Office would not confirm that those were the names of diplomats expelled by Iran last month, triggering a tit-for-tat retaliation by the UK.

According to IRNA, Rassam, an Iranian national, told the court a £300,000 budget had been allocated to establishing contacts with political groups ahead of the election, including Mir Hossein Mousavi, the reformist opposition candidate who claims he was robbed of victory.

"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," he was quoted as saying. "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."

The Foreign Office said: "This is completely unacceptable and directly contradicts assurances we had been given repeatedly by senior Iranian officials. We deplore these trials and the so-called confessions of prisoners who have been denied basic human rights."

The development will further increase pressure for diplomatic action. At the time of the arrests, there were demands for members of the European Union to withdraw their ambassadors from Tehran and for the imposition of stronger sanctions.

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