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UK condemns "unjustified" Iran embassy worker's trial

Sat Aug 8, 2009 1:56pm EDT

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LONDON (Reuters) - Britain condemned the trial of an Iranian employee of its Tehran embassy on spying charges on Saturday, calling it an "outrage" and saying it breached past assurances from senior Iranian officials.

Political analyst Hossein Rassam is on trial with Iranian moderates and a French citizen accused of involvement in the political unrest which followed the Islamic Republic's disputed June presidential election -- unrest that Iran says Britain and other Western countries have fueled.

"I am deeply concerned by the unjustified charges today laid against Hossein Rassam," said British Foreign Minister David Miliband.

"Hossein is a member of our embassy staff going about his legitimate duties. Iranian action against him, and those against (French national) Clotilde Reiss and a member of the staff of the French embassy in Tehran only brings further discredit on the Iranian regime," Miliband added.

The Iranian news agency IRNA said Rassam was on trial for espionage, had confessed in court to passing information about the unrest to Washington, and had said that British diplomats had attended demonstrations.

Rassam's confession featured in Iran's second mass trial in a week, apparently aimed at silencing the moderate opposition and ending protests that erupted after the disputed June 12 presidential election.

"This is completely unacceptable and directly contradicts assurances we have repeatedly been given by senior Iranian officials," a British Foreign Office spokeswoman said, describing the action against Rassam as an "outrage."

"We deplore these trials and the so-called confessions of prisoners who have been denied their basic human rights."

Leading Iranian moderates say the election was rigged in favor of hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the dispute has plunged Iran into its biggest internal crisis in 30 years. At least 26 people were killed and hundreds arrested in the unrest.

Britain and other Western nations have a tense relationship with Ahmadinejad over Iran's nuclear research, which Iran says is for civilian use but which Western nations believe is intended for military purposes.

In Brussels, the European Union's Swedish presidency expressed concern at the Tehran trial and demanded the two Iranians and one French woman on trial be released.

"The presidency reiterates that action against one EU country, citizen or embassy staff, is considered an action against all of the EU," Sweden said in a statement. "The EU will closely follow the trial and demands that the persons be released promptly."

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