

Eritreans rally against UN sanctions

Hundreds of Eritreans have launched protests against UN sanctions on their country in co-ordinated rallies in Australia, Switzerland and the US.

UK-based Eritreans told the BBC that the sanctions were illegal and an insult to their nation.

Government critics accused Eritrean officials of coercing people to take part in the demonstrations.

The UN says Eritrea backs Islamist rebels in neighbouring Somalia - claims the government denies.

The sanctions, imposed in December, came after intensive lobbying by Eritrea's neighbouring countries and regional blocs including the African Union.

The resolution places an arms embargo on Eritrea, and also imposes travel bans and asset freezes on businesses and senior government officials.

Crowds of Eritreans gathered on the streets of the Australian capital Canberra to demand an end to the measures.

A demonstrator on his way to the Geneva rally told the BBC's Network Africa programme that the sanctions were hitting normal Eritreans.

"They say they are targeting our leadership. We have put our effort, our time, our blood to bring this government and president our support. So if they target him, they are targeting our people," he said. But Eritrean rights worker Selam Kidane said the government had been using "coercion and emotional blackmail" to get people to demonstrate. "Many people have been told they would not be considered Eritrean if they did not take part," she said.

"This is the government of Eritrea orchestrating things to ensure that it still has popular support."

Eritrea has long been accused of meddling in the affairs of its



Eritrea is accused of backing Somali insurgents



neighbours, upsetting the balance of power in the volatile Horn of Africa region.

Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a full-scale war over their border from 1998 to 2000 - a conflict that led to some 80,000 deaths