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Al Jazeera

Iran claims to break up CIA spy network

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Iran has arrested 30 people it says were engaged in a "complex espionage and sabotage network" run by the United States, state media reported.

The network of alleged spies was controlled by the Central Intelligence Agency through US embassies in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Malaysia, according to an intelligence ministry statement posted on the Mehr news agency's website on Saturday.

"Due to the massive intelligence and counterintelligence work by Iranian intelligence agents, a complex espionage and sabotage network linked to America's spy organisation was uncovered and dismantled," the statement said.

"Elite agents of the intelligence ministry in their confrontation with the CIA elements were able to arrest 30 America-linked spies through numerous intelligence and counterintelligence operations."

The statement also said Iran had identified 42 US intelligence officers in the three named countries.

"They engage in collection of information regarding Iran's nuclear, aerospace defence and bio-technology fields," among other areas, the ministry said.

The spy network worked under the cover of labour recruitment agencies, the statement posted on

Mehr's website said.

"The elites, educated and naive people were recruited to get visas, residency permits, education abroad and employment," it said.

Spying in Iran can carry the death penalty. Washington has had no diplomatic presence in Iran since the 1979 revolution which deposed the US-backed shah and was followed by the lengthy occupation of the US embassy.

Diplomatic cables published by the WikiLeaks website showed the US operated information-gathering desks on Iran in neighbouring countries where diplomats would seek to glean intelligence from travelling Iranians.

The announcement of the arrests comes two days after Barack Obama, the US president, made a speech on the Middle East, reiterating Washington's view that Tehran sponsors terrorism and is seeking nuclear weapons, charges Iran denies.