After Building New AU Headquarters, China Spies on Addis Ababa Facility

By **Amira El Masaiti** - January 27, 2018

Rabat **– In 2012, the Chinese government "graciously offered" African States a gift and constructed the African Union's headquarters in Addis Ababa. The act of soft diplomacy proved to be a rather self-serving maneuver to spy on the activities and discussions being conducted by leaders of the exclusive continental group.**

In Addis Ababa, ministers and heads of states meet twice a year to discuss major continental issues. While strict security measures give the impression that that building is closely monitored and secured, an unseen security threat was present from 2012 until 2017. The threat was from none other than those who built the headquarters: the Chinese. An investigation conducted by "Le Monde Afrique" exposed Chinese espionage efforts.

According to the report, for five years, between midnight and 2 a.m., computer servers were reaching a peak in data transfer activity. A computer scientist noticed the oddity of the situation. The organization's technical staff later discovered that the AU servers were all connected to servers located in Shanghai.

Every night, the secrets of the AU were being stored more than 8,000 km away by what was thought to be a diplomatic ally of Africa.

"China's Gift to Friends of Africa"

The glass tower $200 million complex was gifted to the African Union in 2012. The computer systems were fully equipped by the Chinese, allowing them to open an undocumented portal that gives Chinese administrators access to the AU's computing system. This "backdoor" is an intentional fault put into code to allow hackers and intelligence agencies to gain illicit access to information.

"Following this discovery, we have taken some steps to strengthen our cybersecurity," a AU official told Le Monde.

But at least, "The Chinese have nothing to listen to. They have never colonized us. They have supported the struggles of independence on the continent and help us economically today," an AU official told Le Monde anonymously.

Another official believes that, "They are not alone." In fact, the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the British intelligence agencies (GCHQ) have had their share of surveillance on the AU building, according to documents which were extracted by Le Monde, in collaboration with The Intercept.

After the Chinese effort was exposed, the AU acquired its own servers and declined China's offer to configure them. The AU encrypts all electronic communications and, from now on, the highest officials of the institution have foreign telephone lines and more secure communication applications.

They have also taken more strict security measures: cybersecurity experts inspected the building's rooms and disposed of microphones placed under the desks and in walls by the Chinese workers.