

Kremlin Says Tajik Hunt Not Political

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Kremlin pressure on Tajikistan continued Monday as President Dmitry Medvedev denied that the deportation of Tajik migrants from Russia was a tit-for-tat response to the harsh sentence Tajikistan handed down to a Russian pilot.

"If there are people who don't have a [residence] permit, it means that they should be deported," Medvedev told a news conference after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Hawaii, according to a transcript released Monday by the Kremlin. Medvedev said the incident would affect friendly relations between the two countries.

"I really hope that our Tajik friends will hear or have already heard us and in the final decision will be guided not only by abstract considerations, but the general level of relations" between the states, Medvedev said.

Moscow migration officials announced their plan to deport a group of Tajik migrant workers shortly after Russian pilot Vladimir Sadovnichy and his Estonian colleague Alexei Rudenko were sentenced last week to 8 1/2 years on murky charges of smuggling and illegal border

crossing.

Russian officials say the reasons behind the charges remain unclear and hinted that stronger measures may be taken.

Russia's chief doctor Gennady Onishchenko suggested Monday that all Tajik migrants should be banned because the country's underdeveloped health-care system has allowed for the widespread transmission of dangerous illnesses, including TB and HIV, among its citizens.

"A natural way out may be to consider a total ban on work migration from that state until minimum health-care conditions are developed there," Onishchenko was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also commented on the issue Monday, saying Moscow has questions about the actions of the company employing the pilots, which officially reported their troubles only two months after they had been detained.

Sergei Poluyanov, general director of the pilots' airline, Rolkan Investmens Ltd, said Monday that the planes involved were not registered in Russia, contrary to earlier reports, Interfax reported. He declined to say where the planes were registered, simply saying they were registered "abroad." He did not elaborate on why the company failed to report the case earlier.

Meanwhile, Tajikistan's embassy in Moscow was pelted with dozens of paper planes by some 30 pro-Kremlin youth activists in an action sanctioned by the city authorities.

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