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U.S. Irked by Treatment of McFaul

By Ezekiel Pfeifer

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The Obama administration has complained to Russia about the harassment of its outspoken ambassador, who has confronted television news crews and taken to social media to raise suspicions that his cell phone and e-mail were being hacked.

"There's been a number of incidents since his arrival there that have caused us to have some concerns about his security and safety," State Department spokesman Mark Toner said Friday. "So as we would in following normal protocol, we've raised that with the government of Russia."

Toner said the concerns would be raised again in light of events Thursday involving Ambassador Michael McFaul, which prompted the State Department to leap to McFaul's defense for his use of Twitter as a communications tool.

McFaul had suggested in a message on the site that his e-mail was being hacked and his phone tapped.

At a Thursday briefing, Toner played down McFaul's message, saying it was a rhetorical question, not an accusation.

He also defended McFaul's and other U.S. ambassadors' use of Twitter for communicating with local citizens.

"These are ways for chiefs of mission to raise issues for discussion. They're directed at a broad number of followers to air these issues out, if you will. It's an informal way to communicate," Toner said, according to a transcript of the briefing.

Last week, McFaul suggested that his personal schedule was being leaked to the media, after journalists from a pro-Kremlin TV channel showed up at an unannounced meeting he attended with a human rights activist in Moscow.

"Everywhere I go NTV is there. Wonder who gives them my calendar? They wouldn't tell me," he wrote on Twitter. "Press has right to film me anywhere. But do they have a right to read my e-mail and listen to my phone?"

McFaul returned to Twitter on Friday morning for an exchange in English in which he answered questions about the impromptu interview with NTV, which the channel aired Thursday. The U.S. ambassador said he had been nervous during the interview and misspoke "in bad Russian" when he had apparently called Russia "wild."

"Just watched NTV," McFaul wrote. "Did not mean to say 'wild country.' Meant to say NTV actions 'wild.' I greatly respect Russia."

In response to a question about why he was nervous when speaking with NTV journalists, McFaul said there were also people in military dress present.

"Were not just journalists there. Were men in military uniform. People with posters. All strange for me. Learning," he wrote.

Then he engaged in a back and forth about the situation with Twitter user @prostitutkamila.

The State Department had no comment on McFaul's choice of Twitter conversation partners.

Shortly after taking up his post, Channel One aired a program describing McFaul as a "specialist in the promotion of democracy" who came to Russia to organize "a revolution."

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