

Racial Overtone Taints Dorm Dispute

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May 29, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Authorities in the city of Orenburg have moved to oust dark-skinned foreign students from a dormitory located near several children's summer camps, citing concerns about safety.

The effort will leave about a hundred students from Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the CIS — many of whom are the children of diplomats and are in Russia as part of intergovernmental exchange programs — out on the streets as of June 1.

In a letter sent in May to Orenburg State Institute of Management rector Oleg Sviridov — which was obtained by The Moscow Times — city administration head Yevgeny Arapov "recommended" that the school "exclude the presence of foreign nationals from the camp's premises" for reasons of "security."

But Sviridov told The Moscow Times that the city's deputy head Valentina Snatenkova later explained to him the administration's real concern at a meeting to discuss the situation.

"Can you imagine the reaction if negroes were walking around there? They can rape children,

you know," Sviridov quoted Snatenkova as saying.

Repeated calls to Snatenkova's office went unanswered Tuesday.

Sviridov says he is bewildered by Snatenkova's insinuation, noting that his foreign students are all "intellectual guys who know several foreign languages, and many of them hold Ph.D. degrees."

Oksana Churyak, spokeswoman for the city administration, said the authorities were not against foreign students, or any students in particular, but against adult strangers on the premises of the children's camping zone.

"Whether it's students or academicians, or anyone else — we don't care, they are grown ups," she said. "Parents have flooded us with complaints."

Churyak pointed to a number of high-profile cases in Russia where pedophiles trespassed onto the territory of children's summer camps and abused children there.

But Dmitry Bondarenko, deputy head of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said the explanation was just a thin veil for the Orenburg officials' "prejudices, ignorance and intolerance."

"The whole world knows about the manifestations of racism in Russia and this severely damages Russia's image abroad."

Sami Alquzuq, a Palestinian student at the Orenburg institute, told The Moscow Times that he planned to transfer to another university elsewhere in Russia because of the incident.

"I will leave this university exactly because of this situation," Alquzuq said by telephone.

A spokesman for the Palestinian Embassy in Moscow said officials there hadn't heard about the students' eviction.

The city's letter specified that access to the camping zone Dubki — which includes several children's camps and the dormitory, which stands on the grounds of a former children's camp — would require special ID cards and that a checkpoint would be installed at the entrance.

"They told us that they just wouldn't let us in," Robert Fyodorov, head of the university's foreign relations department, said by telephone.

He said the students had already signed contracts and paid to live in the dorm.

"The city administration should to deal with it [children's safety] in some other way," he said.

An Uzbek student living in the Orenburg dormitory called the concerns for the children's safety "absurd," as the grounds of every camp in Dubki were protected by security guards and dogs.

Besides, the dormitory is closed at 11 p.m. "so that no one can come in or out," she said, giving only her first name, Lola.

Nevertheless, the institute's administration will "warn the students against committing violations of the law," Fyodorov said.

With the threat of having nowhere to live, the students were scrambling to make alternative plans for the summer.

Alquzuq said he would have to go to Palestine for the summer, although his parents had wanted him to stay in Russia because the trip is expensive and because he had to learn Russian.

Lola said she had nowhere to go if the dormitory was closed. Calls to the Uzbek Embassy in Moscow went unanswered Tuesday.

There are 121 foreign students currently studying at the Orenburg institute — which is about 1,500 kilometers southeast of Moscow — about 100 of whom live in the dormitory. Four Russian students also live in the building. Of the foreign students, 97 hail from CIS countries, 13 from Africa, eight from the Middle East, two from Afghanistan and one from China.

Churyak, the Orenburg administration's spokeswoman, said officials only discovered the presence of the students after they began preparing the camping zone for the summer in February.

After inquiring with law enforcement agencies, they realized that the foreign students were living on the camp's grounds.

Law enforcement agencies have checked the camping zone and the nearby village for homeless people and have screened camp personnel for prior convictions and mental health, Churyak said.

Last July, a 40-year-old pedophile, Sergei Pashkov, entered a children's camp in the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia and raped several girls under 14 years of age, threatening them with a knife. He was sentenced to 15 years in jail in January.

Last September, police in Samara detained Konstantin Dazidenko, a 33-year-old former teacher at a regional summer camp, for allegedly making child pornography with boys at the camp and posting it on the Internet. The probe into his case is ongoing.

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