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U.S. Jet Skiers to Be Freed Soon in Chukotka

By Ken Martinez

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Crew leader Steven Moll expresses his frustration over the delays for the expedition in this video recorded Saturday.

Six Americans detained on a Chukotka beach by armed men in a tank after crossing the Bering Strait on jet skis will be released shortly, a Chukotka border official said Tuesday.

"We've called Moscow. Now we'll prepare the official documents so they can exit through the country's border, and they will leave soon," a duty officer at the Chukotka region's border service said by telephone.

He said the Americans were staying in a local hotel in the meantime.

The officer, who didn't give his name, said the expedition led by Steven Moll, founder and producer of a reality show chronicling the journey, would be allowed to leave Tuesday or

Wednesday.

The men had not left by Tuesday night, according to a website that shows the location of the jet skis through a navigation tracking system attached to them.

The men were detained Friday after making the trek across the Bering Strait as part of an attempt to circumnavigate the globe in seven years. The men had started in Seattle and made it to Nome, Alaska, in a trip featured in the first season of the reality show "Dangerous Waters," which the group's media manager Chad Dalbec said has been broadcast in 78 countries and was the most-watched show in the U.S. state of Alaska, though it has yet to air in the continental United States.

The six Americans seem to have run afoul of a 2006 order by the Federal Security Service that requires foreigners to obtain explicit permission to enter Chukotka.

"They violated border control rules. We have special stations for international border crossings, and they have now broken Russian law," the Chukotka border guard said.

He declined to comment further, directing additional questions to his agency's headquarters in Moscow. Calls to the Moscow office throughout the day went unanswered, and additional attempts to contact Chukotka officials were unsuccessful.

Moll's wife, Annette, said the men have signed all sorts of papers that they don't understand and have to rely on what a translator tells them. She also said the men had paid some fines, but didn't know how much they were or what they were for.

She said she was convinced the men had gotten the necessary travel documents prepared ahead of time and that they even had a contact in Russia, though she was unable to name the contact.

"They had all their ducks in a row," she said.

Dalbec, the media manager, said the team had used "Russian fixers" hired through a travel agency to obtain the necessary travel documents.

The U.S. Embassy in Moscow said it was aware of the situation and was providing consular assistance to the men but declined to release any more information, citing privacy concerns.

Annette Moll said the men were being treated extremely well.

"The people have been very nice," she said by phone from Folsom, California. "They've been very accommodating. There's been no meanness. It's all been perfect, not necessarily the Hyatt ..."

"I keep asking him, 'Are you OK, are you OK?' And he always says he's fine and he's safe," she said. "But there comes a point where a wife and kids just want their husband and father home."

The Americans' main form of communication since being detained Friday has been through Steven Moll's iPhone, which he has used to send videos, text messages and pictures.

The group's families back in the United States are unable to contact them.

The news about the detention came from a text message sent to Dalbec. "The first message came saying they made it across, then they right away sent a text that armed soldiers in a tank told them to come with them and left guards at their Sea-Doos," Dalbec said by phone. Sea-Doo is a brand of jet ski.

Dalbec said the men's crossing of the Bering Strait was the first ever on a personal watercraft, but now the men may have to immediately repeat the feat, battling eight-meter swells and near-freezing water to make the crossing again.

It was unclear if the men would have to retrace this portion of the route. Moll's wife said the men had been told they could be ferried back to Alaska on a Russian military ship, but emphasized that the men were constantly being given new and contradictory information.

The men had to cut short an attempt to make the Bering Strait crossing last year when a jet ski broke down 25 kilometers from the Russian coast.

Dalbec said this might have been a hint of good fortune.

"That saved them in hindsight because they didn't have any visas or paperwork at the time," he said.

Dalbec said that when the men are released, they will re-embark on the round-the-world trip by heading east, traveling through the Northwest Passage and the icy waters of northern Canada and on to Iceland and Greenland.

He said they would try again to get to Russia. "But this time," he said, "we'll have three or four years to figure out the documents."

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