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U.S. 'Concerned' About NGO Inspections

By Jonathan Earle

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The U.S. Embassy in Moscow has expressed "great concern" about reports that government inspectors have recently searched hundreds of non-governmental organizations, including prominent human rights groups, and asked the Kremlin for an explanation.

"We are following reports of the unprecedented inspections of NGOs taking place across Russia with great concern. The embassy has shared its concerns with the government and asked for clarity as to the purpose of the inspections," the embassy said in Twitter messages late Thursday.

The presidential human rights council also questioned the legality and purpose of the "mass searches" in a letter to Prosecutor General Yury Chaika posted on the council's website on Friday.

Prosecutors have said that the searches are aimed at battling "extremism," but the involvement of fire, tax, labor and other inspectors helped create the impression that "the purpose of the searches is to discover any kind of infraction," a group of council members

wrote.

They added that it is "essential" to hold a special meeting with representatives of the prosecutor's office in the near future to discuss the methods and results of the searches.

Prominent human rights group Memorial and vote monitor Golos have been among hundreds of NGOs in at least 10 regions to face unannounced inspections in recent weeks.

Inspectors conducted a second day of searches at Memorial on Friday and promised a third visit next week, the organization's leader, Arseny Roginsky, told Interfax. Memorial runs both a human rights group and a research center documenting Soviet political repression.

Rights activists say the campaign is meant to scare government critics and uncover groups that fall afoul of controversial laws on extremism and foreign financing.

The prosecutor's office said the checks were part of the agency's plan for the first six months of this year, but did not elaborate, RIA-Novosti reported Tuesday, citing a government statement.

Senior officials have accused the U.S. State Department and other foreign forces of funding NGOs and Kremlin critics to destabilize the government.

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