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U.S. Cites Russia Among Worst in Human Trafficking

By The Moscow Times

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WASHINGTON — An annual U.S. State Department report on Wednesday cited Russia among the world's worst offenders in fighting forced labor and sex trafficking, which could lead to U.S. sanctions, prompting an angry rebuttal from Moscow.

The report said Russia had failed to provide systematic safeguards for victims of trafficking. The U.S. designation drops Russia and China, which are already often at odds with Washington, in the same category as North Korea and Iran.

The State Department ranks countries according to the efforts they make to fight human trafficking. Russia, China and Uzbekistan all fell to the lowest level, Tier 3.

Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying the report used "unacceptable methodology," grouping countries according to their degree of sympathy with Washington.

"In fighting organized crime, including countering trafficking, Russian authorities will never follow instructions worked out in another country, let alone fulfill conditions presented nearly in the form of an ultimatum," it said.

Russia, it said, would retaliate against any sanctions.

The report said Russia's government "had not established any concrete system for the identification or care of trafficking victims, lacking any formal victim identification and referral mechanism," although there were some "ad hoc efforts."

The findings are likely to further complicate relations between the United States and Russia, already strained by the handling of the civil war in Syria, among other issues.

While it was not immediately clear what the Obama administration might do given the downgrade, human rights advocates and some U.S. lawmakers urged strong steps such as imposing sanctions or withholding foreign aid.

Under U.S. law, Tier 3 countries may face sanctions that do not affect trade or humanitarian assistance, such as educational funding or culture programs.

John Sifton, Asia advocacy director for Human Rights Watch, said China and Russia had been given several chances to improve their efforts to combat trafficking and protect victims.

"The question for the White House is whether they're prepared to execute the sanctions," he said. "The question for China, Russia and Uzbekistan is whether they're prepared to make commitments in the next 90 days to avoid those sanctions."

Despite pledges to combat such crimes, countries have failed to identify tens of millions of victims, according to the report, which ranked 188 countries and territories.

Just 40,000 victims of "modern slavery" were identified last year among the estimated 27 million men, women and children who are held against their will globally, the report said.

Most victims were women and girls, although many men and boys were also affected.

Overall, far more countries were downgraded rather than deemed to have improved, Sifton said.

"This is a much more negative report than [in] years past," he said. "Russia and China rightly deserve attention, but many other countries have very serious trafficking and forced labor problems."

Countries showing improvement included the Republic of Congo, Iraq and Azerbaijan, Sifton said.

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