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Russia Denies U.S. Embassy Staff Are Being Deliberately Harassed

By Jennifer Monaghan

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The U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

Russia's Foreign Ministry has issued an angry denial following a report that U.S. Embassy staff are facing increased harassment and psychological pressure while working in Moscow, appealing to the U.S. to stop the "negativity."

In an article published Monday, U.S.-based broadcaster ABC News reported that a number of embassy staff had encountered intimidation during their employment in Russia.

Citing a report by the U.S. State Department's Inspector General's Office published late last year, ABC said " [U.S.] employees face intensified pressure by the Russian security services at a level not seen since the days of the Cold War."

Some U.S. officials spoke of being openly tailed by Russian agents, while others said they would return home to find their possessions had been moved in their absence, ABC reported,

adding that the names of the alleged victims had been withheld in the interests of security.

U.S. Embassy spokesman Will Stevens was cited as saying the harassment had prompted embassy and State Department officials to raise the issue "with various interlocutors within the Russian government," while ABC reported that U.S. President Barack Obama had aired his grievances at a meeting with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

In an online statement published Tuesday, Russia's Foreign Ministry dismissed the report as "groundless."

"The voiced complaints are below the level of cheap spy detective stories. They are brought down to trivial fantasies about hacked personal e-mails, slashed tires and mysterious break-ins," the statement said.

"But if Washington has launched a 'public' discussion, we also have something to say," the ministry added, before detailing alleged violations against Russian staff working in the U.S.

"We can recall a recent incident involving the use of force not only against the employees of our embassy in the U.S. but also against their wives who were detained, handcuffed and questioned. Despite our appeals, the U.S. side did not offer any apologies," the ministry said in its statement.

According to the ministry, employees of the Russian Scientific and Cultural Center in Washington have also been deliberately harassed, adding that staff were constantly receiving phone calls.

The tit-for-tat accusations come as relations between the West and Russia have plummeted to levels not seen since the end of the Cold War, with the West levying economic sanctions against Moscow over for its policy on Ukraine.

In its Tuesday statement, Russia's Foreign Ministry appealed to its U.S. counterpart not to risk further denting the already delicate relations between the two counties.

"We advise our colleagues in the U.S. not to contribute further negativity to the already gloomy background in our relations. Problems are not solved in this way, but are only made worse," the ministry said.

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