

Russia Denies Hosting Top Iranian Commander

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Ghasem Soleimani

A senior Russian diplomat on Friday denied claims that an Iranian general visited Moscow in violation of United Nations sanctions banning travel.

The reported visit last month by Major General Ghasem Soleimani, the commander of the elite Quds Force in Iran's Revolutionary Guard, had raised concerns in Washington. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry expressed those concerns to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in a phone call on Thursday, the State Department said.

"I have no information whatsoever that he visited Russia," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Friday. He said Russia had assured the United States that Soleimani had not visited Moscow and was surprised to hear the continuing expression of concern.

Fox News reported that Soleimani traveled to Moscow last month for meetings with President Vladimir Putin and his defense minister. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, earlier denied that the president had met with the Iranian commander.

Soleimani has been on the UN sanctions blacklist since 2007, which bans travel and also requires that all countries freeze his overseas assets.

Soleimani's reported visit has been used to bolster the arguments of those in the U.S. who oppose the nuclear agreement reached last month with Iran. The deal, which would curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions, comes up for a vote in the U.S. Congress in September.

Ryabkov, who was Russia's lead negotiator at the Iran talks, said the Americans interested in undermining the deal have "only political arguments and none based on substance."

He also addressed critics within Russia who said Moscow should have boycotted the talks on the grounds that the resulting agreement will lead to lower prices for oil and hurt Russian exports. Ryabkov said an agreement still would have been reached and "on conditions far worse for Russia."

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