The Moscow Times
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U.S. Embassy Staff Barred Entry to Moscow Properties

August 01, 2017



A country house at a dacha compound used by U.S. diplomats for recreation, in Serebryany Bor residential area in the west of Moscow, Russia, July 31, 2017 **Tatyana Makeeva / Reuters**

Russia blocked access on Tuesday to U.S. Embassy recreational property in a Moscow suburb and closed a 2,000 square meter warehouse in an industrial area in the capital's southern outskirts.

The move is part of Russia's response to a U.S. Congress vote last week to codify existing sanctions against Moscow. Russia has also ordered Washington to cut its diplomatic staff in Russia by more than 700.

While Aug. 1 was the official start date of the U.S. property closure, U.S. Embassy spokesperson Maria Olson complained they had not been allowed access to the site for two days.

An unidentified Russian Foreign Ministry official told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency that the Americans were to blame for not acquiring the requisite permits to access the property. The official added that blaming Russia for blocking access amounted to a "pre-

meditated provocation."

At the end of 2016, the White House under former President Barack Obama expelled 35 Russian diplomats from the U.S. and closed two Russian diplomatic recreational facilities as a response to alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

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Russia will also cut 755 positions at U.S. diplomatic missions no later than Sept. 1, leaving just a total staff of 455 at the American embassy in Moscow and at U.S. consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok.

On Sunday, President Vladimir Putin said the moves were Russia's response to "an unprovoked and serious step toward worsening Russian-American relations."

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