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U.S., Russian Diplomats Meet in Helsinki to Discuss Relations

By Reuters

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David Hale **U.S. Mission Photo / Eric Bridiers**

Senior U.S. diplomat David Hale met with Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, in Helsinki on Wednesday to discuss U.S.-Russian relations, the State Department said, amid tensions between the two countries over a range of issues.

The meeting between Hale, who is undersecretary for political affairs, and Ryabkov followed June 28 talks between President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan.

U.S.-Russia ties remain strained by everything from Syria to Ukraine as well as allegations of Russian interference in U.S. politics, which Moscow denies. In a recent television interview, Putin said relations were "getting worse and worse."

"The undersecretary stressed that while the United States seeks to narrow differences and

foster cooperation with Russia on a number of global challenges, Russia's negative actions continue to be a barrier for progress in our bilateral relationship," the department's spokeswoman, Morgan Ortagus, said in a statement.

Without elaborating, she said the two had also discussed regional challenges in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Ryabkov told Russian news agencies that he and Hale discussed Venezuela but failed to find common ground. Russia and China are staunch allies of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, while most Western powers have backed opposition leader Juan Guaido.

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"I discussed Venezuela with Hale, the dialogue on this issue was difficult," the state-run RIA news agency quoted Ryabkov as saying on Wednesday.

"There is no common ground with the U.S. on Venezuela so far. Russia does not have military forces in Venezuela. We are not quitting a dialogue. Russia needs to send its specialists to Venezuela periodically but it won't report to the U.S. on that," RIA reported Ryabkov as saying.

Russia's state-run TASS news agency quoted Ryabkov as saying the meeting did not discuss an exchange of Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine held in Russia on spying charges that he denies.

"We indicated that we are ready to exchange people who are serving sentence in the U.S. and Russia. Paul Whelan is not among them because there is no verdict yet in his case," Ryabkov said, according to TASS.

Moscow this month proposed a prisoner swap, calling on Washington to free Russian pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko. The news fueled speculation that Moscow is seeking a prisoner exchange involving Whelan.

Yaroshenko is serving 20 years in the United States for conspiracy to smuggle cocaine into the country. He was arrested by U.S. special forces in Liberia in 2010.

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