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U.S. Planning to Close Last Consulates in Russia

By AFP

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U.S. consulate in Yekaterinburg, Russia is due to close. **TASS**

Donald Trump's outgoing administration is planning to close the two remaining U.S. consulates in Russia, the State Department confirmed Saturday, as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office amid high tensions with Moscow.

The U.S. will close its consulate in the Far Eastern city of Vladivostok and suspend operations at its post in Yekaterinburg, a department spokesperson told AFP.

The decision followed consultation with Ambassador John Sullivan and was part of "efforts to ensure the safe and secure operation of the U.S. diplomatic mission in the Russian Federation," the spokesperson said.

CNN reported that a State Department letter to Congress this month said the move was a response to "ongoing staffing challenges for the U.S. Mission in Russia in the wake of the 2017

Russian-imposed personnel cap on the U.S. Mission."

Ten diplomats assigned to the consulates will reportedly be relocated to the US embassy in Moscow, while 33 local staff will lose their jobs.

The State Department did not confirm the numbers involved but said the "resulting realignment of personnel at U.S. Embassy Moscow will allow us to advance our foreign policy interests in Russia in the most effective and safe manner possible.

"No action related to the Russian consulates in the United States is planned," the spokesperson added.

The closures would leave the embassy in Moscow as the United States' last diplomatic mission in Russia.

Moscow ordered the closure of the U.S. consulate in St. Petersburg in March 2018 during a diplomatic spat sparked by the poisoning of Sergei Skripal on British soil.

It was unclear whether the closures would happen before Jan. 20, when President-elect Biden takes office.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Friday that Russia was "pretty clearly" behind a devastating cyberattack on several U.S. government agencies that security experts said could allow attackers unfettered access to critical IT systems and electric power grids.

Yohannes Abraham, executive director for the Biden transition team, said the hack was of "great concern" and that the Biden administration would meet any cyberattacks with a response inflicting "substantial cost."

Russia has denied any involvement in the incident.

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