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Russian Diplomats in North Korea Facing 'Acute Shortages' of Food, Essentials as Frustration Builds

One high-ranking diplomat in Moscow with knowledge of the issue said Russia was "very unhappy" about the harsh treatment of its diplomats.

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Ahmad Ysni / EPA / TASS

Russian diplomats in North Korea are growing increasingly frustrated with the "severe conditions" in which they have found themselves as anti-coronavirus measures cut off the secretive country from the rest of the world.

In a Thursday statement, Russia's Embassy in Pyongyang said diplomats in the country are facing an acute shortage of essential goods sparked by coronavirus restrictions and noted an ongoing exodus of foreign diplomats from the isolated country.

“Leaving the [North] Korean capital can be understood since not everyone can withstand the unprecedented severity of total restrictions, acute shortage of essential goods including medicines, and lack of opportunities to treat health issues,” the Embassy’s statement said, adding that some of its staff have left as there have been “many problems.”

In an unusual move earlier this year, the Russian Foreign Ministry published a video showing a group of Russian diplomats and their families making a dramatic exit from North Korea on a hand-pushed rail car.

According to one high-ranking diplomat in Moscow with knowledge of the issue, the Foreign Ministry published the footage, which was shared widely on social media, in order to “pressure and embarrass” the North Korean government over its treatment of Russian diplomats.

“Russia doesn’t like putting North Korea on the spot like this, but it was very unhappy about the harsh treatment of its citizens. There are real food and medicine shortages so they decided to make a statement with the video,” the diplomat told The Moscow Times under conditions of anonymity.

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North Korea was one of the first countries to close borders due to Covid-19 and impose strict trade restrictions with neighboring China and Russia, which has come at a steep cost to its economy. The Russian Foreign Ministry previously said Russian diplomats were unable to leave their homes due to strict lockdown measures.

According to a recent report from the World Health Organization (WHO), North Korea has reported zero confirmed Covid-19 cases as of March 18. North Korea self-reports its Covid-19 numbers to WHO.

In its Facebook statement Thursday, Russia’s Embassy in Pyongyang published photos of what appear to be deserted foreign embassies in the North Korean capital, adding that fewer than 290 foreign nationals and only nine ambassadors remain in North Korea.

“We wish our colleagues from the Pyongyang diplomatic corps, with whom we have become particularly close and friendly during the harsh months of coronavirus confinement, a happy return to their homeland.”

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