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U.S., Russia Clash Over Embassy Staff Levels Again

By AFP

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Almost 200 staff at U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia were laid off Sunday after Russian banned embassies hiring local staff. **Valery Sharifulin/TASS**

The United States and Russia clashed Monday over the staffing allowed at their respective embassies despite the latest talks aimed at bringing more stability to a turbulent relationship.

In an interview, the Russian ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Antonov, deplored what he called "expulsions" of Moscow's diplomats, saying the United States had become "persistent and creative in this business" by uniquely limiting Russians to three-year visas.

"We received a list of 24 diplomats who are expected to leave the country before September 3, 2021. Almost all of them will leave without replacements because Washington has abruptly tightened visa-issuing procedures," he told U.S. monthly international affairs magazine The National Interest.

State Department spokesman Ned Price described the ambassador's remarks as "inaccurate," saying the Russians knew their visas would expire after three years and that they were free to apply for extensions.

But he reiterated a complaint that Moscow had forced Washington to lay off nearly 200 locals at U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia effective Sunday due to a new prohibition on hiring Russian or third-country staff.

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"It is unfortunate because these measures have a negative impact on the U.S. Mission to Russia's operation, potentially on the safety and security of our personnel, as well as our ability to engage in diplomacy with the Russian government," Price told reporters.

"I will say that we reserve the right to take appropriate response measures to Russia's actions," he said, while denying that the three-year validity of visas was linked.

But President Joe Biden's administration on April 15 expelled 10 Russian diplomats over what Washington alleged was Russian involvement in election interference and a cyberattack.

Price described past actions as a "response to the Russian government's harmful actions" but said the United States valued "open channels of communication."

Biden met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva in June, with both leaders describing the encounter as business-like despite the range of differences between the two countries.

Last week senior officials met again in Geneva to discuss arms control, part of a new dialogue established by Putin and Biden with an aim of encouraging more predictability in ties.

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