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Russian Plane Lands in U.S. to Remove Diplomats Expelled for Alleged Espionage

By AFP

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The Russian Embassy in Washington, DC. **Aaron Siirila (CC BY-SA 2.5)**

A Russian plane landed at Washington's international airport Saturday to pick up about a dozen diplomats from Moscow's UN mission who are accused by Washington of espionage, authorities said.

The United States closed its airspace to all Russian aircraft after Moscow invaded Ukraine.

The Ilyushin Il-96 aircraft was allowed, however, to land at Dulles International Airport. The landing was confirmed by the FlightAware website, which tracks all air movement.

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"The U.S. government approved a flight chartered by the Russian government to facilitate the departure of Russian UN Mission personnel who were expelled for abuse of their privileges of residence," a State Department spokesman told AFP.

"This special exception was done... to ensure Russian mission personnel and their families departed by the date we had instructed," the spokesman added, speaking on background.

The United States had called on Monday for the expulsion of 12 members of Russia's UN mission by March 7.

A day later, again citing alleged espionage, the U.S. ordered the expulsion of a Russian national working for the UN secretariat.

"This is a hostile move against our country," Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in a Facebook message, adding that Moscow "totally rejected" the U.S. claims.

The Russian mission employs about 100 people, according to a Russian diplomatic source.

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