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U.S. Denounces Russian Arrest of Former Consulate Worker

By AFP

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Yuri Smityuk / TASS

The United States on Tuesday denounced Russia's arrest of a former employee of a U.S. consulate, who risks prison time for what Washington said were routine activities.

Russia's state-run TASS agency said Robert Shonov, a Russian national, was being held under a law against "confidential cooperation" with a foreign state.

Shonov worked for more than 25 years for the U.S. consulate in the Far Eastern city of Vladivostok until 2021, when Moscow imposed restrictions on local staff working for foreign missions.

The State Department said that Shonov was since working for a private company, contracted by the U.S. embassy in Moscow, that compiles press accounts from publicly accessible Russian media "in strict compliance with Russia's laws and regulations."

"The allegations against Mr. Shonov are wholly without merit," said State Department spokesman Matthew Miller, who "strongly condemned" the arrest.

Shonov could face three to eight years in prison.

"It's clear that unacceptable activities by unfriendly states are not slowing down but rather are going up," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said, as quoted by TASS.

The State Department scoffed at the allegations.

"Like any diplomatic mission in the world — including Russia's mission in the United States — the U.S. embassy contracts for local services to operate its diplomatic mission," Miller said.

"His being targeted under the 'confidential cooperation' statute highlights the Russian Federation's blatant use of increasingly repressive laws against its own citizens."

Relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated sharply since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, with the United States leading efforts to punish Moscow and arm Kyiv.

Even before the war, the United States was at loggerheads with Russia over rules on staffing of its embassy, which Washington said had been reduced to a skeleton crew.

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