

Press Releases: Senior Administration Official on Russia

Special Briefing
Senior Administration Official
Via Teleconference
August 31, 2017

MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone, for joining us today for this background call on Russia. On the phone with us from the State Department we have [Senior Administration Official]. [Senior Administration Official] will be identified as the Senior Administration Official. This call is on background and is embargoed until the end of the call. So now let me turn it over to [Senior Administration Official], who will make a few opening remarks before we take your questions.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hello, everyone, and thanks for your interest in this issue and for joining us on short notice. I hope you've seen the statement that we released a short time ago. I want to first reiterate some of the points that were made in that statement. First, although we believe that Russia's decision to limit the size of our mission was unwarranted and detrimental to the overall relationship between our countries, I can confirm that we have implemented the decision. Today we informed the Russian Government that in the spirit of parity, which was the principle that they invoked in insisting that we reduce the size of our mission, we will reduce – we will require the closure of the Russian consulate general in San Francisco. In addition, we will require that they close a chancery annex in Washington, D.C. and a consular annex in New York City. These closures must be completed by September 2nd.

I want to point out that even after these closures, Russia will still maintain more diplomatic and consular annexes in the United States than we have in Russia. We've chosen to allow the Russian Government to maintain some of its annexes in an effort to arrest the downward spiral in our relationship.

I want to also highlight that it's our hope that with this move in the direction of parity, which the Russians said they were seeking, we can avoid further retaliatory actions by both sides. Our goal is really to find a way to get to better relations between our two countries. That's all I will say at the top.

MODERATOR: Okay. With that, we'll take your questions.

OPERATOR: Our first question comes from the line of Josh Lederman with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Two questions. One, if you could just give us a little bit of detail about the – what these facilities outside of San Francisco are. I mean, obviously the Russians have a consulate in New York, so what is the consular annex that you've targeted and why, and also the chancery annex?

And second, given that this all – this escalating tit for tat over kicking out diplomats and shuttering each other's facilities seemed to start in December of 2016 when the U.S. PNGed all those Russians and shuttered their recreational facilities – given that we were the first ones to take that action and now we're doing it again, what reasonable expectation can you have that the Kremlin is not going to feel some type of pressure to now step it up and retaliate again as you've urged them in your statement today not to do? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, thanks for that question. So the first part of your question had to do with the annexes. So the – Russia – in San Francisco, what we required to be closed was the Russian consulate general, and there is also an official residence, so that's what they will be closing there. And in Washington, D.C. and New York, they have a number of annexes that have different offices. The annex in Washington, D.C. is – currently houses their trade mission and the one in New York also houses a trade mission.

Regarding previous actions, the actions that this government took in December – I think you all know the reasons why we took those steps. It had to do with harassment of our diplomats and interference in our domestic affairs, in our elections. So I think those actions spoke for themselves. I think that we are responding in this instance to the Russian desire for parity in the diplomatic relationship, and we have taken these steps in that measure, in that spirit, and it is our hope that the Russians will recognize that since they were the ones who started the discussion on parity and we're responding and complying with what they required of us.

MODERATOR: (Off-mike.) Okay, we'll go to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question is Yeganeh Torbati from Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much. I was just wondering if you could speak to the importance of the consulate in San Francisco. Is it the largest Russian diplomatic operation outside of the embassy or is it behind New York, and maybe why did you choose that one as opposed to the consulates in Seattle or Houston or New York?

And then also, what impact do you think this move will have on U.S. business ties to Russia and the ability of Americans to do business in Russia, since they'll probably have a harder time applying for Russian visas? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So – I'm sorry, the first question was – oh, selection. Well, we had – so relative sizes. I think the Russian consulates,

I can't really speak to how large each of them are, but they have four consulates now. They'll be going down to three. They're all on the smaller side compared to the embassy. San Francisco is the one that is the oldest and most established of the three – of the four. So I think in looking at which annexes or which consulates to close, we weighed a variety of criteria, and that just for a variety of reasons appeared to be the one that made the most sense.

And then what was the other question?

QUESTION: Just about, like, the impact on U.S. business.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Visas – oh, visas, yeah. The Russian visas or U.S. visas?

QUESTION: Americans trying to do business in Russia now possibly having to wait a longer time for Russian visas.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, that's a question I think to direct to the Russian embassy. Certainly, they have three other consulates and the embassy that issue visas, as far as I'm aware. So that's best – question directed to them.

MODERATOR: All right, thank you. We'll take the next question now.

OPERATOR: Next is the line of Laura Koran with CNN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much for doing the call. A couple questions. First, can you explain a little bit more how Russia was notified about this? Was it raised at all in the Secretary's call with his counterpart yesterday? And then is the U.S. requiring that the staff at these offices actually be expelled, or could they theoretically be reabsorbed elsewhere?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, so the – Secretary Tillerson phoned Lavrov today to inform him that we had met their required reduction in size by their deadlines. And he also informed him of our plans to close the facilities in question. There was also a meeting between our acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs John Heffern, who conveyed the decisions and our response to the Russian Deputy Chief of Mission Dmitry Zhirnov.

And then what was the second part of the question? Oh, yeah. So we are not expelling any Russians at this time. We have informed the Russians that they may be reassigned to other diplomatic or consular posts in the United States if they choose to do so.

MODERATOR: All right, thank you. We'll go on to the next question now.

OPERATOR: Next is Kylie Atwood from CBS News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you so much for doing this. Two – one quick follow-up question. You said that these were where trade missions were housed. Where else does Russia have trade missions in the U.S.? Could you just give us some

details on that?

And what do you expect them to do with these buildings? They have to close them, but do the actual buildings have to be turned over to the U.S. Government? In some instances, they're connected to other Russian Government buildings. So what are they meant to do with the buildings? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't have information with me on other trade missions, but I – you would have to check with them. They may have them in other cities as well. Those activities do not have to be suspended; those activities can be carried out in other annexes or other locations if they choose to do so.

In terms of what will happen to the buildings, the Russians – the buildings that are owned by the Russians will continue to be owned by the Russians, and it will be up to them to determine whether they wish to sell those or dispose in some other way. They just will not be authorized for diplomatic or consular activities, and they won't have – they won't be recognized as such. I think at least one of the facilities is leased, so I would presume they're just going to end their lease for that facility.

QUESTION: So what can they do in those buildings? Can they still have events there? What are they authorized to do?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: At this – any facility that is – that they continue to own that is not recognized as a diplomatic annex, there – the only authorized activities would be the protection and maintenance of the property.

MODERATOR: Okay. Go on to the next question now, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Dmitry Kirsanov with TASS. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) hear me?

MODERATOR: Go ahead.

QUESTION: I wanted to ask you about how long-term this decision is, or this is irrevocable, so to say. Because you were saying that the Russians are now essentially have to get rid of those properties. So there is no way back? It's – this decision is final? Is that what you were saying?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think I didn't say anything about how long-term this was. I mean, certainly we continue to want to improve our relations between the two countries. We have areas of contention between our countries and concerns that the Russian side has not addressed. So I can't really say that this is permanent. Certainly, if the Russian side wanted to try to address some of our concerns, we would always be willing to listen and keep an open mind, because our fundamental goal is to find a way to improve the relations between our countries.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MODERATOR: All right. We'll go on to the next question now, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing the call. When you mentioned that the Secretary phoned Foreign Minister Lavrov, you said that he had told him they had met the fully required reduction. So are you confirming the number, 755, that the Russians have used? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not confirming that number. I'm confirming the Russians required that we reduce our presence to a total of 455, so I'm confirming that we have met that requirement.

MODERATOR: Okay. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Conor Finnegan with ABC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey. Sort of related to that question, can you say at all what the breakdown was between Russian staff, Russian nationals who worked at the U.S. diplomatic posts, and Americans, and whether or not those Americans now who have had to leave diplomatic posts in Russia are being reassigned elsewhere or any sort of details on what they're doing next, as opposed to being laid off or something?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I can't really get into details on numbers. Let me just say that the Russian requirement had an impact on both Russian and American staff. And we've had to respond in both taking care of the Americans and the Russians in different ways. So I'm not really prepared to go into any details there.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: Next question is from the line of Francesco Fontemaggi with AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. Sergey Lavrov have just regretted the escalation of tensions between – after the U.S. decision, doesn't seem to feel its kind of parity. So did the minister and Secretary Tillerson discuss some steps to go forward and to improve relations, as you said you wish?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, they discussed – they both expressed a desire to find a way to improve our relations and they agreed that they would meet in September.

QUESTION: And they discussed some new steps or not yet?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not prepared to go into greater detail.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Okay. On to the next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from the line of Michelle Dubert with NBC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much for doing this. I'm wondering if –

MODERATOR: I'm sorry. You cut out there. Could you repeat the question?

QUESTION: – can – if you're able to provide the addresses for those annexes in Washington and New York that are being ordered to close.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I can't provide those addresses right now.

MODERATOR: All right. We'll go on to the next question, please. (Pause.) We can take the next question now. (Pause.) Operator, we can take the next question now. (Pause.) We can take the next question now. (Pause.) Please hold while we figure out the technical error that –

OPERATOR: Mr. Ackerman, your line is open.

QUESTION: Thanks very much. Thanks for doing this call. Quickly, can you confirm in New York that the facility you are closing, you're ordering closed, is in the Bronx or on the Upper East Side, to follow on that question. And then secondly, and broadly, does the State Department anticipate that for the near term, the suggestion reportedly mulled by the White House to return the new – the Long Island and Maryland facilities used by the Russians is a dead letter for now?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't – I have to say I'm not a New Yorker. I have no idea where these – where the property is. You're asking the wrong person. And then the question of the recreational facilities is – there's no development on that right now.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you very much. We'll go on to the next question.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Cindy Saine with Voice of America. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. Could you tell us where Tillerson and Lavrov will meet in September? And do you have any more of Lavrov's reaction on the call?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I think it's likely that they will meet on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September, in New York. And the call with Foreign Minister Lavrov was very professional, and the Russian foreign minister agreed with the sentiment that it was important to find a way to improve our relations.

MODERATOR: All right. Now we'll have time for one last question. We can go there.

OPERATOR: Our last question comes from the line of Michele Kelemen with NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. I know you weren't going to speak about how many Americans were pulled out, but I wonder if you were able to choose which officials were taken out, and just confirm that they're still on the payroll, unlike what President Trump seemed to be suggesting. And also, when do you expect to be resuming normal visa processing in Russia, given the staff reductions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So the Russians imposed a ceiling on our number of our employees, so yes, it was up to the United States to determine which were the functions and personnel that we wanted to retain. And in terms of the Americans, Americans are – the diplomatic personnel are like military personnel; they can be transferred and sent to other duties. The President's comments – he was being sarcastic, as he said.

Then the second part of the question was –

QUESTION: About resuming visa processing? I mean –

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, yeah. So –

QUESTION: – are we to assume that a lot of the people that were pulled out were consular officials? Is that why?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So the – so in terms of our visa processing, we had to temporarily suspend it because of the disruption caused, and we will be resuming shortly visa processing but at a much reduced rate because of the reduction in personnel.

MODERATOR: All right. I'd like to thank everyone for joining us today on the call and a special thanks to [Senior Administration Official] for joining us and giving us this information. I just want to remind everyone this call was on background. It's attributable to a senior administration official and the embargo is now lifted. Thank you, everyone.

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