

Russia escalates row in spy case



PHOTO BY AP/DMITRI LOVETSKY

A man carries boxes from the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg, Russia, as a Russian police officer guards the entrance Friday.

MOSCOW — The crisis between Russia and the West over the poisoning of a former double agent in Britain grew Friday as Russia ordered new cuts to the number of British envoys in the country.

Russia also summoned 23 foreign ambassadors to inform them that some of their diplomats would be expelled, a day after ordering 60 U.S. diplomats to leave and demanding that Washington's consulate in St. Petersburg close on short notice.

The expulsion of diplomats on both sides has reached a scale unseen even at the height of the Cold War.

Two dozen countries, along with NATO, ordered out more than 150 Russian diplomats this week in a show of solidarity with Britain over the nerve-agent

poisoning of Russian ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Britain that London blamed on Russia.

Moscow has vehemently denied involvement in the March 4 nerve-agent attack in the English city of Salisbury and announced the expulsion of the same number of diplomats from each nation.

The ministry escalated its response Friday, saying it has ordered Britain to reduce the number of its diplomats in Moscow to the level that Russia has in London. The exact number wasn't immediately clear, but state news agency RIA Novosti agency quoted an unidentified Russian diplomat as saying the number of British diplomatic personnel in Russia exceeds the number of Russian envoys in Britain by more than 50 people.

The ministry said it summoned the British ambassador to hand him a protest over the "provocative and unsubstantiated actions by Britain, which instigated the expulsion of Russian diplomats from various nations for no reason." It gave London a month to reduce its diplomatic personnel in Russia.

Adding to the tensions, the ministry said late Friday that a plane belonging to Russian state airline Aeroflot was being searched by police in London. Ministry spokesman Maria Zakharova said there was no explanation given for the search, which she called "the latest provocation." The plane left London's Heathrow Airport for Moscow about three hours behind schedule.

Commenting on the Russian move to expel more U.K. diplomats, a spokesman for the British Foreign Office said "it's regrettable, but in light of Russia's previous behavior, we anticipated a response."

"However, this doesn't change the facts of the matter: The attempted assassination of two people on British soil, for which there is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian state was culpable," she said. "Russia is in flagrant breach of international law and the Chemical Weapons Convention, and actions by countries around the world have demonstrated the depth of international concern."

A hospital treating the Skripals said Thursday that the 33-year-old daughter Yulia was improving rapidly and was now in stable condition, but her 66-year-old father remained in critical condition.

Speaking to reporters Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted that “Russia didn’t start any diplomatic wars” and “remains open for developing good ties.”

He added that Russia has called a meeting of the international chemical weapons watchdog next week to press for an “unbiased and objective investigation.”

Russia has accused Britain of failing to back up its accusations with evidence and refusing to share materials from the probe. The Foreign Ministry said it told the British ambassador Friday that Moscow is ready to cooperate in the investigation.

Earlier this week, the Russian Foreign Ministry alleged that British special services could have been involved in the poisoning and claimed that Britain, the U.S., the Czech Republic and Sweden all have researched the class of nerve agent that London said was used to poison Skripal.

Britain and its allies have rejected the Russian nerve-agent claims.

The countries informed Friday by Russia of diplomat expulsions were Australia, Albania, Germany, Denmark, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Canada, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, Finland, France, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Estonia.

The Foreign Ministry added that it would also consider mirror expulsions of diplomats from Belgium, Hungary, Georgia and Montenegro.

Bulgaria announced it would not expel any Russian diplomats. The country is heavily dependent on Russian gas supplies and tourists.

President Donald Trump drew bipartisan praise in Washington this week for its expulsions, days after he was criticized for congratulating Russian President Vladimir Putin on his re-election in a phone call.

The American president has been faulted by lawmakers for voicing continued optimism about improving relations with Putin while questioning the finding of U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia interfered in the 2016 election.

In response to the U.S. move earlier this week to close the Russian Consulate in Seattle, Moscow also shut the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg, giving it until today to vacate the premises.

“There is no justification for this response” because Russia was “responsible for that horrific attack on the British citizen and his daughter,” State Department spokesman Heather Nauert told reporters in Washington. The U.S. isn’t ruling out further steps against Russia, Nauert said.

The confrontation “looks not so much like a cold war than a fight without rules,” said Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian upper house of parliament. “One in which the bully himself complains when he gets a taste of his own medicine.”

Russia last year also ordered staff numbers slashed by nearly two-thirds, or 755 positions, at the U.S. Embassy and consulates as tensions flared over the alleged Kremlin hacking in the presidential election.

Information for this article was contributed by Vladimir Isachenkov, Gregory Katz, Irina Titova, Jim Heintz and Nataliya Vasilyeva of The Associated Press and by Henry Meyer, Mike Dorning, Larry Liebert, Stepan Kravchenko and Olga Tanas of Bloomberg News.

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