

Vladimir Putin spokesman says Russia doping charges appear unfounded

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Moscow: The accusations of state-sponsored doping in Russian track and field appear to be unfounded, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman said Tuesday.

Dmitry Peskov told journalists that whenever any charges are made, they must be based on some evidence.

"As long as there is no evidence, it is difficult to consider the accusations, which appear rather unfounded," Peskov said.

In Russian newspapers, many followed the government's lead in playing down the accusations from the World Anti-Doping Agency commission.

The scandal was typically confined to a small item in the sports pages, with only two business papers and the sports dailies giving it front-page space.

"Are they taking Rio away from us?!" read the headline on the front page of Sport Express, referring to calls to ban Russia's track and field team from next year's Olympics.

Russia has for years reveled in its re-emergence as a sports superpower, the pinnacle coming when it topped the medals table at the last year's Sochi Olympics.

That prestige is again in jeopardy, with the country's internal intelligence service, the FSB, accused of running surveillance on the Olympic doping lab.

Worse, it comes at a time when the country is already under pressure over its hosting of the 2018 World Cup amid the scandals rocking FIFA.

The reaction to Monday's track and field revelations among Russian officials was disjointed, with sentiments ranging from denial to suggestions of a Western political conspiracy.

Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko, whose ministry is implicated in the report, even threatened to withdraw all government financial support for anti-doping work in protest at the report's accusations.

On state television, Mutko argued that the report presented "no serious objective evidence" of state involvement in doping and that its focus on Russia was unfair.

"Doping is not the problem of Russia," Mutko said. "Russia shouldn't be singled out. It's a world problem."

The head of Russia's medical agency, Vladimir Uiba, told Interfax he believed the report to be "politically motivated" and linked to international sanctions against Russia.

The Russian athletics federation denies the main charges in the report. Acting president Vadim Zelichenok told The Associated Press on Monday that calls to ban Russia's track and field team from next year's Olympics are not "objective" because the federation leadership changed earlier this year, meaning some of the key figures identified in the WADA report are no longer employed.

Regardless of whether its team is banned from the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, the report is a blow to Russian athletics.

The WADA commission recommended a lifetime ban for several athletes, including Olympic 800-meter champion Maria Savinova, who was filmed discussing doping methods.

That follows a string of positive tests and doping bans that have caught dozens of Russian athletes, including five Olympic track and field gold medalists in the last two years.

- AP