

US expels 60 Russian diplomats, orders Seattle consulate shuttered in response to UK spy case

26/03/2018 08:46 by admin

Senior Trump administration officials say the expelled Russians include 12 spies who the U.S. believes are working under diplomatic cover at Russia's mission to the United Nations.

File image

Warsaw (Poland): In a decision reminiscent of the Cold War era, the US today expelled 60 Russian diplomats, describing them as "intelligence officers" and ordered closure of the country's consulate in Seattle over the use of nerve agent allegedly by Moscow against a former Russian spy in the UK.

A dozen of these expelled diplomats are based at Russia's Permanent Mission to the UN.

"Today President Donald J Trump ordered the expulsion of dozens of Russian intelligence officers from the United States and the closure of the Russian consulate in Seattle due to its proximity to one of our submarine bases and Boeing," the White House Press Secretary, Sarah Sanders, said.

All Russian diplomats, connected to the country's intelligence agencies, and their families have been given seven days' time to leave the country.

The White House said this is in retaliation to the use of nerve agent against former spy Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom, which blames Russia for the attack.

Skripal, 66, and his daughter Yulia, 33, both remain critically ill in hospital in Britain.

Moscow has denied these allegations. The United Kingdom has already expelled 23 Russian diplomats.

The United States takes this action in conjunction with its NATO allies and partners around the world in response to Russia's use of a military-grade chemical weapon on the soil of the United Kingdom, the latest in its ongoing pattern of destabilising activities around the world, Sanders said.

"Today's actions make the United States safer by reducing Russia's ability to spy on Americans and to conduct covert operations that threaten America's national security. With these steps, the United States and our allies and partners make clear to Russia that its actions have consequences," she said.

She said the US stands ready to cooperate to build a better relationship with Russia, but this can only happen with a change in the Russian government's behaviour.

There are 100 Russian intelligence officials based in the US. This is the first step, a senior Trump administration official told reporters during a conference call.

The US reserves the right to expel more, the official added.

The US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, said that the United States has begun the process of expelling 12 intelligence operatives from the Russian Mission to the United Nations who have abused their privilege of residence in the United States.

"After a review, we have determined that the 12 intelligence operatives engaged in espionage activities that are adverse to our national security. Our actions are consistent with the United Nations Headquarters Agreement," she said.

Haley said Trump's decision shows that Russia's actions have consequences.

"Beyond Russia's destabilising behaviour across the world, such as its participation in the atrocities in Syria and its illegal actions in Ukraine, it has now used a chemical weapon within the borders of one of our closest allies," she said.

"Here in New York, Russia uses the UN as a safe haven for dangerous activities within our own borders. Today, the United States and many of our friends are sending a clear message that we will not stand for Russia's misconduct," Haley said.

The strong US move comes after the UK alleged that on March 4, Russia used a military-grade nerve agent to attempt to murder a British citizen and his daughter in Salisbury.

"This attack on our Ally the United Kingdom put countless innocent lives at risk and resulted in serious injury to three people, including a police officer," the State Department Spokesperson, Heather Nauert, said.

In response to this outrageous violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and breach of international law, today the US will expel 48 Russian officials serving at Russia's bilateral mission to the United States, she said.

"We will also require the Russian government to close its Consulate General in Seattle by April 2, 2018. We take these actions to demonstrate our unbreakable solidarity with the UK, and to impose serious consequences on Russia for its continued violations of international norms," Nauert said.

The US calls on Russia to accept responsibility for its actions and to demonstrate to the world that it is capable of living up to its international commitments and responsibilities as a member of the UN Security Council to uphold international peace and security, she said.

The US move was followed by 14 European Union member states who expelled a number of Russian diplomats in a coordinated response.

Germany, France and Poland have said they will each expel four Russia diplomats, the Czech Republic and Lithuania three, Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands two, and Latvia one.

Colonel Skripal was convicted of treason in 2006 and jailed for 13 years for selling secrets to MI6, which had recruited him in the 1990s. The senior intelligence officer with Russian military intelligence GRU, was pardoned in a spy swap in 2010 and settled in Salisbury, Wiltshire.

The US move revives memories of the Cold War (from 1950s to early 1990s) when the two super powers - the United States and the Soviet Union - were engaged in a competition for increasing their sphere of influence and often targeted each other with such expulsions.

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