



Russians leave country retreats in the US, ordered out by Obama
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Elliot Conway, Mayor of Upper Brookville, speaks to the media near a Russian compound in Upper Brookville, Long Island, New York, U.S., December 30, 2016. REUTERS/Rashid Umar Abbasi

CENTREVILLE, Md./UPPER BROOKVILLE, N.Y.: In small convoys of vehicles, Russians departed two countryside vacation retreats outside Washington and New York City without fanfare on Friday, ordered out by U.S. President Barack Obama who said the premises were linked to spying.

The Russians were given until noon ET (1700 GMT) on Friday to vacate the compounds in Centreville, Maryland, and in Upper Brookville on Long Island in New York state. By early afternoon, trucks, buses and black sedans with diplomatic license plates had left.

"The premises have been vacated and it's under control of the government," Elliot Conway, the mayor of Upper Brookville, told reporters soon after noon, when a total of six vehicles had driven away from the Russian compound there.

"They've been quiet neighbours," Conway said, adding he had never met anyone who lived at the estate set in rolling countryside about 25 miles (40 km) from Manhattan.

In Maryland, about a dozen vehicles left the sprawling waterfront estate, watched by officials from the U.S. State Department. Some passengers smiled and waved as they rode away from the compound, which is located in a wooded farm area with winding narrow roads.

Obama abruptly ordered the closures on Thursday, saying the compounds had been “used by Russian personnel for intelligence-related purposes.” It was part of his response, including the expulsion of 35 suspected Russian spies, to what U.S. officials have called cyber interference by Moscow in the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign. The Kremlin has denied the hacking allegations.

The closures echoed the old days of tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union.

When Soviet officials bought compound in Centreville to be used as a country retreat for diplomats posted to Washington, it rattled residents of the bayside Maryland town. It was 1972, in the deep chill of the Cold War.

People were suspicious of the Soviets and "thought they were spies ... It was the folklore of Centreville," said Joe Dawkins, who works locally in agriculture.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation kept an office in Centreville for a time, residents said. The FBI office closed years ago, they said, and over time neighbours in this community of about 4,500 people got used to Russian-accented officials shopping at the liquor store, hunting nearby and dining at a popular Irish pub, O’Shucks.

The Russian government maintained the compound after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Property records show the Russian government owns an estate on Town Point Lane in Centreville valued at US\$8 million for tax purposes.

The 45-acre (20-hectare) estate includes a Georgian-style brick mansion, tennis courts and smaller cottages. It sits on the banks of the Corsica and Chester Rivers, where the locals like to fish, harvest oysters and hunt geese.

PARTIES AND VODKA

Neighbours said the Russians were a lively bunch, seen water-skiing in summer and known for throwing a large, annual Labor Day party. Each May, to celebrate Russia’s Victory Day, marking the defeat of the Nazis in World War Two, the compound hosts a soccer tournament for diplomats from former Soviet republics.

George Sigler, a Centreville councilman, said he had visited the compound several times for a semi-regular regatta held jointly by the Russians and a sailing club in nearby Annapolis. There, Sigler said, he socialized with diplomats, including a former Russian ambassador to the United States, Yuri Ushakov.

“We were all talking the same language, they were all my age,” said Sigler, a former Marine who at one point in his service defended U.S. embassy compounds. “All of us drank way too much vodka.”

Once, just hours after Sigler admired the quality of the vodka served at the compound, Ushakov had a bottle of it dropped off at the town hall, Sigler said.

But mostly, residents said, the Russians appeared to keep to themselves, outsiders in this otherwise tight-knit town, where many families have roots going back generations.

Reverend Joseph Ligan, 59, spent time at a weekend retreat for Jesuit priests next to the Russian compound. He said his foreign neighbours always felt distant when he passed them in town or on the road.

“People here tend to wave to me,” he said. He paused and gestured towards the compound. “They don’t tend to wave.”

A senior U.S. law enforcement official said the U.S. government had long known the compound was used by Russia for intelligence operations, but had not previously seen it as an immediate threat.

In Centreville, from the dock of a vacation house he and his wife stay in, Austin Haase, 31, has a clear view of the Russian estate. In summers past, he saw Russians enjoying water sports, Haase said.

Haase said he doubted the place was used for intelligence gathering. "It's more a slap in the face (to the Russians), like they're taking away their toys," he said.

CLAY PIGEON SHOOTING

The compound in New York state is set back from the view of the road at the top of a steep hill, accessed by a driveway that curves upwards out of sight. Local resident Nick DeMartino, 23, said he had lived a few houses away for five years and came out to see the departure on Friday.

DeMartino said he was used to hearing people in the compound shooting clay pigeons with shotguns on Sundays. "We knew they were Russian diplomats," he said. "We'd see them driving around town."

Another neighbour remarked on the abrupt departure. "It's pretty sudden for the government to be stepping in and saying you have to leave here immediately," said Jared Greenman, 28.

"I know in the Cold War there was a chess match of people spying on each other from across the street."

Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, accused the Obama administration of targeting Russian diplomats' children by closing compounds that he said would be used by families over the Christmas and New Year school vacation.

"It's quite scandalous that they chose to go after our kids, you know? They know full well that those two facilities ... they're vacation facilities for our kids. And this is Christmas time," Churkin told reporters when asked about the compounds.

- Reuters

(Additional reporting by David Ingram at the United Nations; Writing by Frances Kerry; Editing by Howard Goller)