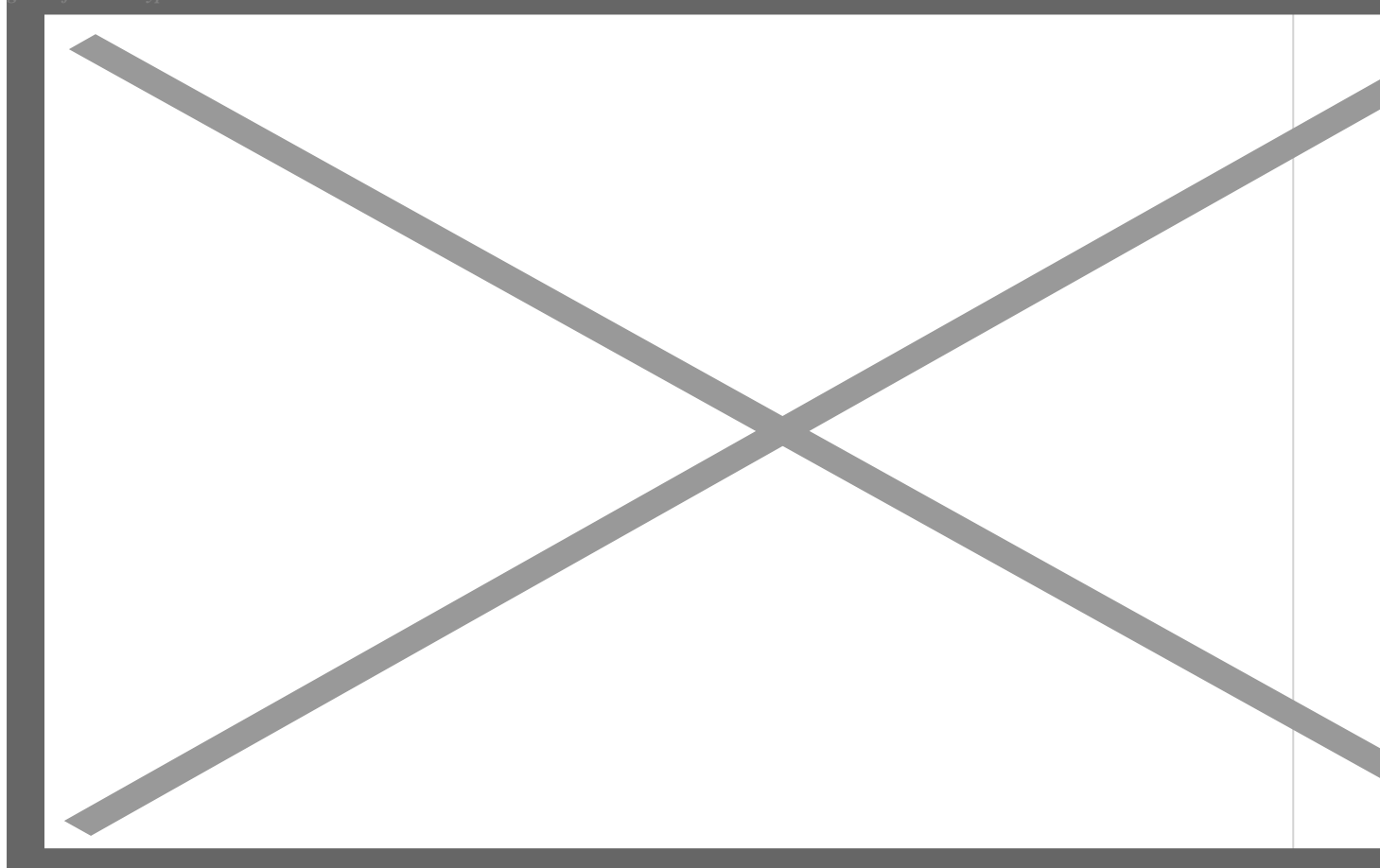


Russia accuses three U.S. embassy staff of theft, wants immunity lifted

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**The building of the United States's Embassy in Novinsky Boulevard in central Moscow, Russia.
(Photo: AP)**

Moscow, October 10 (RHC)-- The Russian foreign ministry has called on the U.S. embassy in Moscow to lift the diplomatic immunity of three of its staff suspected of stealing personal belongings from a Russian citizen.

The three employees would have to leave Russia immediately if the United States refuses to lift their diplomatic immunity, the Interfax news agency cited the ministry as saying.

According to Interfax, three US citizens from the Moscow embassy under the influence of alcohol stole a backpack from a Russian man in a bar in central Moscow. The Moscow police identified the three men as servicemen of the U.S. Marine Corps aged 21 to 26, the news agency reported, citing police spokesman Vladimir Vasenin.

The Russian state-owned news agency Tass said the alleged theft occurred on September 18 and reported that the Interior Ministry estimated the value of the stolen items at just over \$200.

A criminal case has been launched over the incident and the possible charges carry a maximum penalty of five years in jail. Moscow's move comes days after NATO expelled eight members of Russia's delegation to the military alliance over allegations that those supposed diplomats were acting as spies for the Kremlin.

The relationship between NATO and Russia is at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War and Moscow slams the decision for undermining the normalization of ties between the US-led military alliance and the Kremlin.

The U.S. Mission to NATO declined to comment on the reasons behind the expulsion, but Jeff Adler, a spokesperson for the U.S. Misión to NATO, said: "It was based on intelligence, and we don't discuss intelligence matters."

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