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Embassy tunnel angers Russians

March 5, 2001
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MOSCOW, Russia -- Russia's Foreign Ministry has demanded details of a secret tunnel allegedly built underneath the Soviet Embassy in Washington for eavesdropping.

Present and former U.S. officials told CNN the tunnel -- under what is now the Russian Embassy -- was built by American intelligence services and packed with millions of dollars worth of sophisticated equipment.

They believe its existence may have been revealed by Robert Hanssen, an FBI agent arrested last month on allegations of spying for Moscow.

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Monday summoned the charge d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow for an official explanation on the tunnel, said to have been jointly operated by the FBI and the National Security Agency.

It said the story, if true, would amount to "a flagrant violation of the recognised norms of international law that throughout the world govern relations with foreign diplomatic missions."

A spokeswoman for the Foreign Intelligence Service -- an agency that succeeded the KGB -- said she would not be surprised.

"Digging tunnels is a favourite pursuit of American special services," Tatyana Samolis said in remarks carried by NTV television station, recalling a U.S. spy tunnel dug in Berlin in the 1950s.

The Soviet Embassy was built in the 1970s and 1980s but was not fully occupied until 1991 because of a dispute over claims that the Soviets bugged a new U.S. Embassy building in Moscow.

American officials abandoned that building in 1985 after finding it laced with KGB listening devices.

In 1978, U.S. Marines discovered Soviet agents burrowing a tunnel under the

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U.S. Embassy.

The hole was packed with electronic gear -- and a Soviet agent wearing headphones, according to news reports. The embassy denied the incident at the time.

A former Russian ambassador to Washington, Vladimir Lukin, said the report of a new tunnel showed both sides were hypocritical in their public statements about the embassy spy scandals of the 1980s.

"They dug this channel and later assailed us for bugging their embassy in Moscow. That shows that the level of morality on both sides is the same," he said in an interview on the Echo of Moscow radio station.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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