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Russia space agency squabbles with U.S. over visas





Friday, July 25, 2003 Posted: 10:25 AM EDT (1425 GMT)

MOSCOW (AP) -- A top Russian space official flew to the United States Friday following bitter complaints from Russia's space agency about the delay in granting him a visa.



The U.S. Embassy in Moscow said in a statement that it had "coordinated closely" with the Russian space agency to ensure that its representative attend the meetings in Monterrey, Calif. scheduled for Saturday.

"The visa was issued and the traveler departed today," it said.

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Sergei Gorbunov, a spokesman for the space agency, Rosaviakosmos, said agency deputy director Alexander Medvedchikov and the deputy international relations director Alexei Krasnov had applied for visas in June but had to return their plane tickets Thursday because they had not received visas.

Gorbunov said Friday that Krasnov had received his visa, got a new ticket and left for the United States where he was to help organize the meeting of space officials. Medvedchikov's plans changed and he decided not to go to the United States, Gorbunov said.

The grounding of the U.S. shuttle fleet following the shuttle Columbia's disaster on February 1 boosted the importance of Russia's space program, leaving Russian Soyuz crew capsules and Progress cargo ships as the only links to the international space station for the time being.

Gorbunov said Friday that Rosaviakosmos had been concerned about the U.S. Embassy's slowness in issuing visas for its officials. "It was an unpleasant thing," he said.

The space agency's complaint, which made Russian television newscasts, came amid a flap between the Russian Foreign Ministry and the U.S. Embassy over new U.S. visa requirements, under which virtually anybody applying for a nonimmigrant visa anywhere in the world will be required to appear in person for an interview beginning August 1.

The Foreign Ministry lashed out at the changes Tuesday, saying that it was not informed in advance of the new rules, which it said will hamper contacts between the two countries.



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The U.S. Embassy said the ministry had been aware of the changes "for some time" and that the criteria under which visas will be issued remain unchanged.

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