

Fed Cup Coach Finally Gets Visa

Combined Reports

Russia Fed Cup captain Shamil Tarpishchev will be able to attend this weekend's semifinal against the United States in Vermont after receiving an eleventh-hour U.S. visa on Thursday.

The captain of the two-time champion women's team was finally issued a visa by U.S. authorities early Thursday and boarded a flight to New York soon after. "This has been one hell of a week," Tarpishchev said from Sheremetyevo Airport.

According to the rules of the International Tennis Federation, Tarpishchev should have been issued his visa at least five days prior to the tie, which will be held July 14 and 15 in Stowe, Vermont.

He first complained about a delay on Tuesday, accusing the United States of deliberately ruining his coaching plans and calling for the event to be relocated to a "neutral country."

The government backed him the following day with a statement blasting U.S. "bureaucratic procrastination."

The visa was issued before dawn Thursday in an unusual occurrence, a U.S. Embassy spokeswoman said.

Tarpishchev expressed gratitude to the Embassy for "leaving an employee [at work] overnight" to issue the visa, Itar-Tass reported.

Tarpishchev said his visa problems had been going on for the past decade and he thought he might be on a black list by U.S. authorities because he has been accused in the past of having links to the Russian mafia, a charge he denies.

The visa debacle was one of the few glimmers of intrigue left in a semifinal that has lost much of its luster since three top players -- Maria Sharapova, Svetlana Kuznetsova, and now Serena Williams -- have withdrawn from the competition.

Sharapova, ranked No. 2 in the world, pulled out of the Russian side on Tuesday, the day after it had been announced she would lead the team. Both she and world No. 4 Kuznetsova cited nagging shoulder injuries as their reason for withdrawing.

Sharapova's spot will be filled by No. 58 Elena Vesnina, while Tarpishchev named 66th-ranked Alla Kudryavtseva as an alternate for Kuznetsova.

A source at the U.S. Tennis Association said Wednesday that Serena Williams was also dropping out after hurting her left wrist and thumb during Wimbledon last week.

The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the announcement would not be made until Thursday, said Williams would be replaced by 44th-seeded Meilen Tu.

The U.S. team also includes Lisa Raymond and Venus Williams.

The semifinal marks only the sixth meeting of the two countries in the Fed Cup's 45-year history. Russia got its first win against the United States in the 2005 semifinal and went on to defeat France two months later in a dramatic final.

The United States hasn't won a Fed Cup title since 2000.

AP, Reuters, MT