

4 Russian Bikers Held as Spies in Iraq

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The detained bikers have reportedly been beaten and might face espionage charges. Above, a biker on his motorcycle in Moscow. **Denis Grishkin**

Four Russian bikers who refused to obtain Iraqi visas looked set to be freed after five days in custody late Thursday following frantic diplomatic talks and growing anger among the biker community in Russia.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani promised Russia's ambassador to Iraq during a meeting that the bikers would be freed soon, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told reporters in Moscow.

"Let's hope that this is how it happens," he said in televised remarks.

Iraq's foreign minister confirmed to the BBC that the bikers would be let go.

The bikers, who were detained Sunday as they approached Baghdad, were themselves to blame for their predicament because they had crossed the Turkish border into Iraq without valid visas, Lukashevich said.

In addition, he said the bikers knew that they were breaking the law, because an Iraqi military patrol had detained them in the city of Kirkuk as they headed toward Baghdad. He said the bikers were only released after the Russian Embassy in Baghdad intervened.

Embassy diplomats warned the bikers not to resume their trip without visas, but the group pressed ahead anyway, NTV television reported.

Outside Baghdad, the bikers — Oleg Kapkayev, Alexander Vardanyants, Oleg Maximov and Maxim Ignatyev — were detained by men wearing military uniforms and taken to an Iraqi military base, news reports said.

Kapkayev managed to somehow send a text message to his biker friends in Russia that the four were accused of spying and had been threatened with 10-year prison sentences or possibly the death penalty, NTV said.

But Lukashovich denied that the bikers had faced punishment.

The appeal for help, however, rallied the biker community behind the group, and several biker clubs in Moscow got involved in trying to win the men's release.

Alexander Orlov, a member of the Moscow-based motorcycle club RAMCC, told RIA-Novosti earlier Thursday that the bikers have been severely beaten and dismissed talk that they might have been using forged visas.

He claimed that he was in continual contact with the men and a Russian diplomat in Iraq.

"They are among the most experienced motorcycle tourists in Russia," he said. "They have crossed the whole world. ... The speculation that they forged the visas is mere nonsense."

It was unclear whether the detainees had been beaten.

Another biker club organized a rally outside the Iraqi Embassy in Moscow on Thursday afternoon.

State Duma Deputy Igor Igoshin also appealed to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to intervene, and President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the Foreign Ministry would do all it could to secure the bikers' release.

Putin has been forging good relations with the biker community in the past two years, riding motorcycles and attending biker events.

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