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Russian blockade on Georgia

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U.S. behind Tbilisi: Putin

MOSCOW: Russia has imposed a total economic blockade on Georgia even as the latter decided to release the four Russian military officers whose arrest on spy charges last week triggered the worst crisis between the two countries.

Russia is cutting land, sea and air transport links with Georgia, as well as postal services, the Russian Government said on Monday.

Shortly after Moscow announced the sanctions, Georgia said it would hand over the arrested Russians to the head of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, who arrived in Tbilisi on Monday.

Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov described the spy charges filed against the Russian officers as "absurd." He said three of the four arrested officers had arrived in Georgia only three months ago. Russian President Vladimir Putin over the weekend denounced the arrests as an act of "state terrorism" and likened Georgia's domestic and foreign policies to those of Lavrenti Beria, the feared head of the Soviet secret police under Joseph Stalin. Both were ethnic Georgians.

Mr. Putin said he held the United States responsible for encouraging Georgia's anti-Russian policies.

"Foreign sponsors"

"These people [in Georgia] think that they are safe and comfortable under the umbrella of their foreign sponsors," Mr. Putin said at a meeting with key Government Ministers on Saturday.

The Republican majority in the U.S. Senate on Saturday tabled a bill to support early NATO membership for Georgia and some East European countries.

To tighten Georgia's economic blockade, the Russian Parliament plans to approve a bill on Wednesday allowing the Government to ban money transfers to Georgia. The ban will hit an estimated one million Georgian migrant workers in Russia who send back home money.