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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Record 20,000 Troops but No May 9 Jets

By Alexandra Odynova

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A scaled-down number of military vehicles driving through Red Square during a Victory Day parade on Monday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

President Dmitry Medvedev promised upgrades and dignity for the armed forces as a record 20,000 soldiers and officers marched across Red Square for Victory Day on Monday.

But in a change from recent years, the parade celebrating the 66th anniversary of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany featured less military hardware and no warplanes.

"There are things we can't give up under any circumstances. They are people's liberty, a country's dignity and peace at home," Medvedev said in an address to the armed forces. "These are precious to everyone and make us a united nation."

Medvedev also said Russia was committed to peace and promised a decent life to those serving in the military, which has been tarnished with hazing scandals and allegations of inefficiency in recent months.

“The state will continue to do everything to make sure that the military is properly equipped and actively upgraded with modern equipment, some of which can be seen at the parade,” he said.

About 100 units of military hardware participated in the parade, blocking off most of the city center to traffic on Monday morning as they traveled from the north of Moscow toward the Kremlin.

The units included Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile launchers, T-90A tanks, the C-400 Triumf anti-aircraft weapon system and, for the first time, the Pantsyr-S air defense system. Also on display were GAZ-2330 Tigr vehicles, although last year the Defense Ministry elected to purchase the Italian Iveco LMV M65 Lynx over the home-produced Tigrs.

For the first time in its half-century history, the parade was also joined by 200 officers from the Space Forces, Interfax reported.

While remarkable for the sheer number of troops, this year’s parade lacked warplanes, a popular feature in recent years. Several Mi-8 helicopters carrying Russian and armed forces flags flew over the square.

No official reason has been given for scaleback in planes and hardware, but Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said last week that the parade would focus instead on foot troops and military orchestras.

The parade, aired by state television, was closed to the public. Among the invited guests were top state officials, veterans dressed in uniforms decorated with colorful ribbons and medals and Anna Chapman, the former agent returned to Russia in a spy swap last summer.

Some 3,000 policemen were on duty to maintain order, and no major incidents were reported.

Police in the southern city of Astrakhan detained about 15 people on suspicion of plotting terrorist attacks in various cities on Victory Day, state television reported Sunday.

Meanwhile, a clash erupted Monday in the Ukrainian city of Lviv when a group of 300 nationalists carrying anti-communist flags brawled with police guarding Victory Day commemorations in a local cemetery, Interfax reported.

In Kyrgyzstan, the government celebrated by covering the expenses for a mass wedding for 20 couples who could not afford the costs of getting married on their own.

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