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Armed Men Seize Government Buildings in Crimea

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The Crimean parliament was taken over by armed men early Thursday morning. **The Flying Dutchman**

A group of armed men seized the Crimean Parliament and Council of Ministers buildings in the Ukrainian city of Simferopol on Wednesday night.

Russian flags are hoisted on top of the buildings, Interfax reported, adding that local sources told them that the men are part of a spontaneously "self-defense" unit formed by the region's Russian-speaking population . A flag reading "Crimea Russia" in Russian hangs on barricades outside the building's entrance.

Following the ousting of Kremlin ally and former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych from his post last Saturday, the predominantly pro-Russian Crimea has been divided between Russian separatists and ethnic Tatars who support the new Ukrainian government. In addition to ethnic ties, Russia also maintains a Black Sea naval base in the Crimean city of Sevastopol.

The invaders have not yet issued any demands since seizing the buildings around 4 a.m. Crimean Prime Minister Anatoly Mogilev reportedly tried to conduct negotiations with the unknown men, but was unsuccessful.

Mogilev said that the men do not want to enter into negotiations or explain the reasons for their actions, but that members of the Supreme Council of Crimea were being allowed into the building. An unidentified Crimean government official told Interfax Thursday afternoon that a meeting of the parliament at 2 p.m. local time would discuss greater autonomy for the region.

The scene outside the building turned to one of pro-Russia support in the mid-afternoon, as between 300 and 400 young people with Russian flags crossed police lines and began shouting "Russia! Russia!" ahead of a the planned parliamentary session, Interfax reported. The demonstrations follow larger actions by both pro- and anti-Russia groups in front of the parliament on Wednesday, which turned into violent clashes between the two groups.

No one was injured in the building takeover, Mogilev's press secretary said. The surrounding area has been sealed off by police, and a work holiday has been declared in the city.

"We were building barricades in the night to protect parliament. Then this young Russian guy came up with a pistol ... we all lay down, some more ran up, there was some shooting and around 50 went in through the window," ethnic Russian Leonid Khazanov told Reuters.

Acting Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said on his Facebook page that police had been put on high alert in response to the building seizure. He said "provocateurs are on the march. Time for cool heads, consolidation of healthy forces and precise actions."

Observers speculated about possible military movement midday Thursday after multiple media outlets have reported that there is a line of armored vehicles outside the city near a Russian military base in the Simferopol region.

Interfax Ukraine reported that the tanks, which were headed in the direction of Simferopol, were conducting a training exercise and have since turned around.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry has asked for immediate consultations with Moscow and summoned Russia's envoy in Kiev, Reuters reported.

Acting Ukrainian President Oleksander Turchynov had earlier in the day urged Russian military forces not to move outside of their base in Sevastopol and that doing so would be seen as an act of aggression.

The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's office announced that it has opened an investigation into the building seizure as a terrorist act.

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