

Russia Mulls Giving Humanitarian Aid to Crimea

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President Vladimir Putin has ordered his government to consider giving humanitarian aid to the Crimea, hours after a Russian nationalist who took power as the peninsula's new leader asked Moscow for help.

Putin has also asked the government to talk with "partners" in Kiev about developing trade and economic ties, and with those in the West, such as the International Monetary Fund, about providing financial aid to Ukraine, the Kremlin said late Thursday on its website.

The statement did not specify whom Moscow considered to be its partners in the Ukrainian capital. Russia refuses to recognize Ukraine's new administration, with top Moscow officials saying that ousted President Viktor Yanukovich remains the legitimate leader while denouncing the new administration as a group of mutineers.

The West has recognized Ukraine's new interim government, which was approved

by parliament Thursday.

"Keeping in mind the appeal by the Crimean leadership for humanitarian aid, [Putin] has ordered the government to examine the issue," the Kremlin said in its statement.

Speculation has been mounting about whether Russia may intervene to take control of the Crimea, where its Black Sea naval fleet is based and where more than half of the population speak Russian. Some residents there have called for succession to Russia.

On Thursday, a group of armed men seized the peninsula's local parliament and the regional government headquarters in Simferopol, raising Russian flags over the buildings.

The occupied parliament later named leader of the Russian Unity movement, Sergei Aksynov, as the Crimea's new prime minister. Aksynov, said he was "certain that Russia would extend a helpful hand" and provide financial aid to Crimea, Ukraine's Vesti.Ua reported.

He also recognized the ousted president's role in the disbursement of any aid: "Mr. Yanukovich remains the lawfully elected president, and in this case all the arrangements have been channeled through him."

Russia has offered refuge to Yanukovich, who fled Ukraine and is reportedly staying near Moscow. He said in a statement that he planned to hold a news conference in southern Russia on Friday.

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