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International Diplomats Face Trouble in Crimea

By The Moscow Times

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Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius said Wednesday that Crimea's pro-Russian authorities have blocked a group of military observers from entering the peninsula, putting a dent in hopes that the standoff there will end peacefully.

The Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, said in a statement that 18 of its member states were sending a total of 35 unarmed military personnel to Ukraine's Crimea region on the request of the interim government in Kiev with the aim of monitoring the present situation.

Unidentified military forces started spreading rapidly throughout the region over the weekend, surrounding Ukrainian army bases and taking control of various military installations and transport facilities.

Russia's Federation Council on Saturday voted to give President Vladimir Putin permission

to send troops to Ukraine, though Putin and a number of his top acolytes have said that the occupying forces in Crimea, which has a large ethnic-Russian populace and contains Russia's Black Sea Fleet, are not Russian, but local self-defense units.

Despite some high-profile defections to the Russian side, Ukraine's military has stepped up its resistance to the occupation without firing a shot, refusing to leave various bases in the face of intimidation by the pro-Russian forces and reaching out to the West for support.

Ihor Prokopchuk — Ukraine's ambassador to the Vienna-based OSCE, a forum for security issues that was set up during the Cold War — said Monday at a meeting of the organization's permanent council that Kiev will use "all possible means" to defend itself from a Russian military threat.

Britain, the U.S. and Germany are among the nations that have supplied personnel for the observer mission that was set up with the intention of defusing tensions. However, their inability to inspect the troubled region represents a massive snag.

Linkevicius said he hoped that the Crimean authorities can be talked out of their current stance, but said that they had not appeared keen on establishing contact with other organizations, Delft news agency reported Wednesday.

The Crimean parliament last week voted to dismiss the region's government and installed Sergei Aksyonov, head of the Russian Unity party, as prime minister and set a date for a referendum on the question of expanding the region's autonomy. The referendum has since been moved forward to March 30.

Armed men stopped a special representative of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in Ukraine's Crimea region on Wednesday, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said.

UN Deputy Secretary General Jan Eliasson said Robert Serry had been threatened but had not been kidnapped.

Serry phoned up Ukraine's deputy foreign minister and described the incident as it was unfolding, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry press secretary Yevhen Perebiynis said.

"He said that as he left the headquarters of the navy in Simferopol, his vehicle was blocked by unknown men in uniform with weapons, who said they had an order to take him to the airport. He refused, and they are still holding him."

Crimea is under the control of Russian military forces, although Moscow describes its troops there who wear no insignia on their uniforms as "self-defence" units of the local administration. *(Reuters)*

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