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No Plans For Ukrainian Troop Deployment in Crimea, Defense Minister Says

By The Moscow Times

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The movement of troops in western Ukraine, reported by the country's media, was held as part of military exercises and is not related to events in the breakaway region of Crimea, the acting defense minister said Sunday.

Crimea, the autonomous, largely pro-Russian republic, has been taken over by thousands of troops without insignia widely believed to be the Russian military, though Moscow has denied involvement.

Ukrainian media reported over the weekend that eyewitnesses saw armored vehicles and military trucks leaving the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. The further whereabouts of the convoy remain unknown, prompting rumors it was possibly being prepared for deployment in Crimea.

"No maneuvers, no movements by the armed forces towards Crimea have ever been planned. The troops are carrying out their regular, scheduled duties," Acting Defense Minister Ihor Tenyuh said, UNIAN news agency reported.

Tenyuh said the personnel and vehicles traveled to military training grounds as part of large-scale exercises held in order to determine the combat readiness of the troops. The acting president will later submit a detailed report to the prime minister about the efficiency of the armed forces based on the results of these exercises.

The report came in the wake of a number of military exercises in Russia's western regions in the past days, including air defense drills, combat readiness snap checks and the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile. Russia denied the exercises were linked to the events in Crimea.

Crimean authorities, who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the central government in Kiev, ruled out any contacts with the present leadership on Sunday. The Crimean parliament announced a decision to become a part of Russia on Thursday, and a referendum on the issue is slated for March 16.

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