Negotiations Under Way to Free Ukrainian Journalists in Crimea

By The Moscow Times

March 11, 2014

KIEV — Negotiations are underway between Ukrainian authorities and pro-Russian forces for the release of three Ukrainian journalists seized in Crimea on Sunday, the Ukrainian interior minister said Tuesday.

The three journalists, all women, were detained on the peninsula by members of Russian Unity, a political party which favors the union of Crimea with the Russian Federation, the minister, Arsen Avakov, said on his Facebook page.

"Police have found the kidnapped women journalists in Crimea. Negotiations are taking place. Let us hope all will be well," Avakov said.

The three journalists — Kateryna Butko, Alexandra Ryazantseva and Olena Maksymenko — were detained at a checkpoint manned by Russian Unity and later taken to the port city of Sevastopol, ministry sources said.

The three were the subject of a statement by the Paris–based watchdog Reporters Without Borders on Tuesday which also expressed alarm at what it described as a "steady escalation in violations of journalists' rights in Crimea."

Reporters Without Borders has warned that those behind attacks on the media were trying to turn the region into a "black hole for news."

"The forces controlling the Crimea are responsible for the fate of these journalists," Christophe Deloire, secretary general for the press freedom watchdog, said in a statement Monday.

Tension in the Black Sea peninsula has been growing since pro–Russian separatists took control of the regional parliament, declaring Crimea part of the Russian Federation and announcing a referendum for March 16 to confirm this.

In little more than a week, Russian forces have taken over military installations across Crimea, home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Unidentified men fired in the air on Monday as they moved into a Ukrainian naval post.

"We are alarmed by the steady escalation in violations of journalists' rights in Crimea, which is turning into a lawless region controlled by armed bands whose anonymity reinforces the impunity," Deloire said.

"The frequency of deliberate attacks on journalists and the scale of the censorship suggest a desire to turn the region into a black hole for news and information."

An official who monitors media freedom for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe said after visiting Crimea last week that pro–Russian authorities there were clamping down on media that did not support them and were intimidating reporters.