

Some Crimean Servicemen, Residents Line Up for Russian Passports

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SIMFEROPOL, Crimea — Military personnel and residents in Crimea rushed to apply for Russian passports and drop their Ukrainian citizenship on Thursday, as Moscow tightened its grip on the Black Sea peninsula it wrested away from Kiev.

Crimea voted overwhelmingly in favor of joining Russia in a weekend referendum, and while a narrow majority of the region's 2 million population is Russian, many Ukrainians also supported the switch. Some did not, however, and intend to remain Ukrainian.

Russian troops seized control of two Ukrainian navy bases in Crimea on Wednesday in a sharp escalation of the crisis that has pitted Moscow against the West in a Cold War-style standoff.

Senior Russian commanders were coming in and out of two more Ukrainian military compounds on Thursday — a reconnaissance base outside of the port city of Sevastopol and the Perevalnoye naval base adjacent to Crimea's provincial capital of Simferopol.

In Perevalnoye, a small village southeast of Simferopol that largely consists of residential

buildings housing the base personnel and their families, people lined up to add their names to a list of those wanting to apply for Russian passports.

"This is over. They tore the country apart. For us locals there is nothing more to think about," said a woman who only gave her name as Irina, as she left the base and walked to the village's cultural center to put her family's name on the list.

"We have lived here our whole lives. My husband and I work at the base, our children go to school there — where would we go? Kiev has already abandoned us, there is no place for us in Ukraine," she said.

About 70 families were on the list by late morning.

Many people who serve and live at the Perevalnoye base and have been caught up in the conflict felt the interim government in Kiev had given up on them and offered no real alternative.

"Ukraine just tells us to hold on. That is it. I have seen more senior Russian officers coming here to talk to us than I have heard from my own commanders lately," said Sergei, a soldier with 20 years of service, walking out of the base.

"I want to serve in the Russian armed forces here. Ukrainian authorities have only themselves to blame," he said.

But while some were keen to join Russia, others oppose Moscow's decision to annex Crimea and intend to remain Ukrainian citizens, either staying on the peninsula or, in many cases, leaving at the first opportunity.

"I am getting out of here as soon as the car is ready," said one soldier in Perevalnoye, who did not want to give his name. "I am going to Ukraine. I will not wait for the Russians to expel my family."

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