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NATO Alarmed by Russian Troops After Crimea Annexation

By Natalya Krainova

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A boy in military gear at an anti-war rally in Kiev on Sunday, as Russia's Defense Ministry said 189 military facilities in Crimea now hosted Russian flags.

As President Vladimir Putin finalized the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia on Friday, European officials voiced concerns that Russia may have plans to expand into Moldova's separatist self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic and the Baltics.

NATO's top military commander on Sunday said that Russia had built up a "very sizable" force on Ukraine's border and was "acting more like an adversary than a partner," Reuters reported.

The commander, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, said at an event in Brussels held by the German Marshall Fund think tank that NATO forces should rethink their positioning in case Russia attempts to invade Moldova.

Breedlove's warning came a day after Russian troops seized the last remaining Ukrainian military facilities in Crimea.

Meanwhile, the European Union expanded the list of Russian officials hit by sanctions over the annexation.

Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier echoed Breedlove's fears, saying in an interview with the Welt am Sonntag newspaper published on Sunday that Russia may have opened "Pandora's Box" with its actions in Ukraine.

"We can not overlook the fact that Russia, with its action in Crimea, is flouting the central foundations of the peaceful order in Europe," Steinmeier said.

Several senior Russian officials sprang to appease European officials, however, saying that Crimea's reunification with Russia did not violate military and political stability in Europe.

"The amount of forces and arms based in Crimea is so insignificant that it is simply unsubstantial to talk about any kind of imbalance," Mikhail Ulyanov, head of the Foreign Ministry's security and disarmament department, told Itar-Tass Sunday.

Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said that Russia was in full compliance with international agreements limiting the number of troops near its border with Ukraine, Itar-Tass reported.

Moscow's Ambassador to the European Union, Vladimir Chizhov, also seemed to try and calm the West, telling BBC television on Sunday that Russia did not have any "expansionist views."

Depspite these reassurances, however, U.S. Senator John McCain lashed out at Putin on the same BBC show, comparing Putin to Hitler.

As the rhetoric became more heated on Sunday, republicans in the U.S. Congress urged the Obama administration to send small weapons and other military aid to Ukraine so that it could defend itself against Russian troops that had amassed at the eastern border.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers called for "noncombatant military aid," medical supplies, radio equipment and unspecified "defensive posture weapons systems," Reuters reported.

Putin on Friday signed off on a law to annex the republic of Crimea and the Black Sea port of Sevastopol, which both voted by a majority to secede from Ukraine and join Russia in mid-March under Russian military presence, the Kremlin website reported.

Putin's signature formalized the transition of the two territories to Russia, after a treaty was signed between Putin and authorities in Crimea and Sevastopol late last week and ratified by the Russian parliament.

The European Union on Friday increased from 21 to 33 the number of senior Russian officials to face travel bans and asset freezes over what the West believes to be an illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, presidential aides Sergei Glazyev and Vladislav Surkov, State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko and Dmitry Kiselyov, head of Kremlin-backed news agency Rossia Segodnya, are on the EU's list, among others.

On Friday, Putin's spokeman Dmitry Peskov said Russia would react to any foreign sanctions "based on the principles of reciprocity" and would "react each time," Interfax reported.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich on Saturday told reporters that Russia "reserves the right to make a relevant response to the undertaken action."

Also Friday, the Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, with the participation of Russia, voted in consensus to deploy 100 international monitors to Ukraine by late Saturday for a period of six months to "contribute to reducing tensions and fostering peace," the organization said on its website.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said it hoped the OSCE mission would contribute to "stopping the rampant nationalistic banditry" and to "eliminating ultraradical tendencies" in Ukraine, according to a statement posted on the ministry's website.

The OSCE mission's powers don't apply to Crimea and Sevastopol since they have become part of Russia, the ministry said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry spokesman Yevgeny Perebiynis refuted this, however, noting that Russia was the only OSCE country that believes the OSCE's mission doesn't apply to Crimea.

A Ukrainian Air Force commander is being held after his base in Crimea was stormed by pro-Russian forces, and the acting president called for his release Sunday.

Col. Yuliy Mamchur is the commander of the Belbek Air Force base near Sevastopol, which was taken over Saturday by forces who sent armored personnel carriers smashing through the base's walls and fired shots and stun grenades. One Ukrainian serviceman was reported wounded in the clash. It was unclear if the forces, who didn't bear insignia, were Russian military or local pro-Russia militia.

Ukraine President Oleksandr Turchynov, in a statement, said Mamchur was "abducted" by the forces. He did not specify where Mamchur was believed to be held.

However, prominent politician Vitali Klitschko said Sunday that Mamchur is being held by the Russian military in a jail in Sevastopol, the Crimean city that is the base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

(The Associated Press)

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