

Ukrainian Troops Leave Crimean Bases as Truce With Russia Expires

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Ukrainian soldiers standing together inside a military base in Perevalnoye.

PEREVALNOYE, Crimea — Unlike the unmarked masked soldiers who first seized Crimea three weeks ago, Russian paratroopers strolling across a field near the peninsula's Perevalnoye military base, which they took over on Friday, wore their trademark blue berets and red star cockades.

In other parts of Crimea, Russian troops continued the takeover of Ukrainian positions.

The taking of the Perevalnoye base, 25 kilometers southeast of the capital Simferopol, coincided with the expiry of a truce between Ukrainian and Russian defense ministries made last week after the annexation of predominantly ethnic-Russian Crimea.

"Yes, we are Russians. We are brotherly troops here," said an officer before entering a field camp just meters away from Ukrainian positions.

The Russian takeover of the Black Sea peninsula has been largely bloodless, though one

Ukrainian serviceman was killed and two others wounded in a shooting in Simferopol earlier this week.

In Perevalnoye, several dozen soldiers and their families were seen packing and leaving, but an air-mobile unit located in an isolated compound remained defiant.

"As far as we are concerned, we have no intention to leave without our weapons and vehicles," said serviceman Mykola. He added that talks negotiating their departure were ongoing.

Defense analysts in Kiev say there are between 8,000 and 10,000 Ukrainian troops deployed at about three dozen bases across Crimea, but the Ukrainian military estimates there are up to 20,000 of their troops on the peninsula.

In the Belbek air base, which has so far refused to surrender, some Ukrainian soldiers were seen leaving in pairs or threes, or packing bags and home appliances into cars. Others said they would remain inside until the end.

"We have said goodbyes to our families. There were tears, but now we are ready," Sergei, a soldier, said through the fence, pointing a finger to his forehead, imitating a shot to the head.

Many troops in the Belbek air base carried weapons, but no magazines were loaded. Some hoped they would be able to give up the base honorably and without bloodshed.

Nikolai, a middle-aged serviceman in camouflage fatigues, complained about a lack of orders from the higher command in Kiev and said he was willing to continue to serve in the Ukrainian forces.

"We repeatedly asked Kiev for orders, and it was radio silence, as if they were afraid to take responsibility for us," he said. "The Russians will come, there will be some noise, and that is it, hopefully. We do not plan to die here."

On Thursday, Russian troops in the Crimean naval base of Sevastopol seized three Ukrainian corvettes — Lutsk, Khmelnytsky, and Ternopil — following the takeover of the naval headquarters there a day earlier.

Slavutych, the command ship of the Ukrainian fleet, remained anchored in the main port of Sevastopol on Friday. Its engines were running, but the ship was blocked by three Russian auxiliary vessels and the missile cruiser "Moskva," preventing it from sailing away.

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