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Kerry and Lavrov Meet on Ukraine

By Natalya Krainova

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Ukrainians visiting a makeshift memorial in Kiev on Sunday to mark the 40th day since dozens of demonstrators were killed on Independence Square.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov were set to meet late Sunday as Russia sought to play down Western fears of an imminent invasion of Ukraine.

The meeting marks the latest in a series of diplomatic attempts to resolve the stand-off over Russia's annexation of Ukraine's territories of Crimea and Sevastopol, where the population overwhelmingly voted in favor of seceding in mid-March in what the West has described as a referendum "under the barrel of a gun," though Russia has maintained it was legitimate.

Despite growing fears in the West last week over a Russian invasion of Ukraine, on Saturday, Lavrov said in an interview on state-run Rossia 1 television that Russia has "absolutely no intention of — or interest in — crossing Ukraine's borders," apparently responding to Western reports sounding the alarm over a build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's eastern border.

Western concerns intensified on Friday, when Ukraine's outsed pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovich issued a statement calling on all Ukrainian regions to hold referendums similar to those in Crimea, calling them the only way to preserve Ukraine's integrity, state news agency Itar-Tass reported.

Yanukovych's appeal came after U.S. intelligence officials said they had observed a reinforcement of Russian troops near Ukraine, with the number climbing from 30,000 to 35,000 or 40,000 troops, Reuters reported.

Speaking to President Vladimir Putin by phone on Friday, Obama said a "diplomatic resolution" to the crisis in Ukraine "remains possible only if Russia pulls back its troops and does not take any steps to further violate Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty," the White House reported on its website.

On Sunday, Kerry and Lavrov were expected to discuss the possibility of sending international monitors into Ukraine to ensure that ethnic Russians were not facing discrimination, Reuters reported. In exchange, Russia would pull back its forces from the border. The meeting was set to be held at the Russian ambassador's residence in Paris, Associated Press reported Saturday, citing State Department spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki.

The presence of Russian troops seems to be the biggest bone of contention between the two sides, with Obama urging Putin to move away the troops regardless of their mission.

"It may simply be an effort to intimidate Ukraine, or it may be that they have got additional plans," Obama told CBS in a transcript posted on the broadcaster's website.

"And in either case, what we need right now to resolve and de-escalate the situation would be for Russia to move back those troops and to begin negotiations directly with the Ukrainian government, as well as the international community," Obama said.

Putin is motivated "by a deeply held grievance about what he considers to be the loss of the Soviet Union," Obama told CBS.

The Kremlin's account of Putin's phone conversation with Obama made no mention of the issue of Russia's troops on the Ukrainian border, however. Instead, it cited Putin as expressing alarm about "extremists who are committing acts of intimidation toward peaceful residents," the Kremlin's website reported in English.

Putin also turned to the issue of Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria, where many residents hold Russian passports and which was part of the Soviet Union, complaining that Transnistria "is essentially experiencing a blockade, which significantly complicates the living conditions for the region's residents, impeding their movement and normal trade and economic activities," the Kremlin website reported.

Putin's statements may exacerbate concerns among some NATO officials that Russia ultimately has plans to reclaim Transnistria, and possibly Moldova as well. A similar warning came from Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leanca, who complained of "provocations" in Transnistria and said the events in Crimea might trigger negative events in Moldova.

Putin, however, meeting senior law enforcement officers in the Kremlin on Friday, expressed

pride in Russian troops' handling of the Crimea takeover.

He thanked the commanders and personnel of the Black Sea Fleet and other units stationed in Crimea for their "well-organized professional action that made it possible to prevent provocations, avoid bloodshed, and ensure the referendum takes place in a peaceful and free manner," the Kremlin website reported in English.

Recent events in Crimea "have shown our Armed Forces' new quality and possibilities," he said.

Putin's statements have apparently done nothing to assuage fears in the West of military action.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in an interview with Germany's Focus magazine published on Saturday, said the alliance was "extremely worried" that Putin could send more troops to Ukraine.

"We view it as a concrete threat to Ukraine and see the potential for further interventions," Rasmussen said in comments carried by Reuters.

"I fear that it is not yet enough for him [Putin]. I am worried that we are not dealing with rational thinking as much as with emotions, the yearning to rebuild Russia's old sphere of influence in its immediate neighbourhood," Rasmussen said.

In an interview with state-run Channel One that was set to be aired at 9 p.m. on Sunday, Lavrov defended Russia's right to "move troops around its own territory" and attributed the location of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border to "recent drills" that were "completely within the criteria" of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and monitored by foreign inspectors, including Americans and Ukrainians.

Lavrov also complained in the interview that U.S. and European authorities were apparently asking their diplomats unofficially to skip events where Russian officials hit by foreign sanctions might show up.

The interview was posted on the Foreign Ministry's website early Sunday afternoon.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said in an official statement Friday that four international inspections carried out in March in Russian regions bordering Ukraine "discovered no 'aggressive preparations' and detected no military activity except the one that was declared earlier," Lukashevich said, the Foreign Ministry reported.

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