

Ukraine Armed Forces Land Airborne Troops in Eastern Town

April 15, 2014



A pro-Russian protester breaking a stone at a barricade outside a government building in Donetsk on Tuesday.

KRAMATORSK, Ukraine — Ukrainian airborne troops landed in a town in the east of the country on Tuesday after the Defense Ministry announced it was launching a "special operation" there against pro-Russian separatists.

The town of Kramatorsk is one of 10 localities in Ukraine's Russian-speaking east where separatist rebellions have broken out and the move suggested Ukraine's authorities were going ahead with a plan for a broad military crackdown to end the unrest that began 10 days ago.

Separately, the state security service announced a similar operation had gotten underway in the town of Sloviansk, about 20 kilometers away where pro-Russian militants are occupying state buildings to push their demands for referendums on the status of Ukraine's eastern regions.

In Slovyansk, a correspondent said there was no sign of any forces loyal to Kiev, and no evidence of fighting.

The troops disembarked in Kramatorsk from two military helicopters after an ir Force plane made what appeared to be an unsuccessful attempt to land at the airfield where separatists had set up barricades at the entrance.

This correspondent heard several shots fired from inside the base as a crowd of separatist sympathizers moved toward the gates, but these appeared to be warning shots.

There were no clashes.

A Ukrainian general, Gennady Krutov, who identified himself as the commander of the "anti-terrorist" operation, told the crowd: "We have information that there is shooting going on in here. I came here to clarify that.

"There is an anti-terrorist operation going on in here. I am here to protect you. I address you as citizens of our common country," he said.

But he was met by abusive chants and cries of "Hands off the Donbass," a name for the surrounding region of eastern Ukraine, which is mainly Russian speaking.

As talks grew heated, the crowd numbering several hundred jostled the general, who at one point lost his hat in the commotion.

In Kiev, acting President Oleksander Turchynov said the airfield had been re-taken from the separatists.

At the airfield in Kramatorsk, tense negotiations were going on with a crowd who stood their ground despite an appeal by the local mayor, Gennady Kostykov, for them to return to their homes.

"You will not get shot at if there are no provocations," he said.

Locals, some of them holding the Russian flag, had set up barricades of sand and tires outside the gates to the airport, and prior to the troops landing some of them appeared to be preparing petrol bombs.

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