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Akhmetov Asks Donetsk Workforce to Protest Against Separatists

By Anna Dolgov

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Workers of Metinvest, majority-owned by Rinat Akhmetov's System Capital Management, remove barricades and debris in front of the City Hall in Mariupol, Ukraine.

Ukraine's wealthiest man, the industrialist Rinat Akhmetov, has called for hundreds of thousands of his workers to hold peaceful protests on Tuesday against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In a late-night televised address on Monday, Akhmetov — a mining and metalworking magnate who reportedly has 300,000 people on his payroll — said the action would begin at midday Tuesday with the sound of factory whistles at all of his holdings.

The siren would be sounded daily "until peace is established," Akhmetov said in his address, as his Ukraina television channel interrupted a movie showing to air the broadcast Vesti.ua reported.

Akhmetov, who backed the previous pro-Moscow administration in Kiev, said separatists running the self-styled People's Republic of Donetsk and militiamen who tote combat weapons have brought "banditry and marauding" to the city streets and called for peaceful resistance.

The televised address came shortly after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered troops withdrawal from Ukraine's eastern border, as the world waited to see if Moscow would deliver on its promise.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said hours after the Kremlin announcement that there were no signs of Russian troops pulling back, and White House spokesman Jay Carney said the U.S. administration had "heard that promise before and have yet to see any indication that it's been fulfilled," CNN reported.

Following Akhmetov's announcement, users of Russian social networks appeared more optimistic, saying his entry into the dispute may be a sign that Moscow intends to uphold its promise and withdraw its support of Ukrainian separatists.

Speculation abounded, with readers of the Ekho Moskvy news website suggesting that the multi-billionaire held insider knowledge of Kremlin plans and decided to join the winning side in Ukraine, or had even "coordinated" his strike with Moscow.

Akhmetov has previously maintained a reserved position on the crisis, though his workers reportedly joined police on patrol in eastern Ukraine last week, with one of his senior executives describing the 300,000-strong workforce as an "army" that could sway the course of events, Reuters reported.

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