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Ukraine, Russia Trade Barbs at UN Council Meeting

By Anna Dolgov

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Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk speaks at a media briefing before talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Chancellery in Berlin.

UNITED NATIONS — The Russian and Ukrainian ambassadors bickered Thursday at the UN Security Council, with Kiev urging Moscow to rein in fighters who had joined separatists in eastern Ukraine, and Russia countering that the Ukrainian government should put an end to its military operation.

Ukrainian Ambassador to the UN Yuriy Sergeyev said Kiev wanted to find a peaceful solution to the unrest in the country's east, but the fact that Russia was "exporting instability into Ukraine" all but ruled out that possibility.

While Moscow has tried to paint itself as a mediator in the conflict, Sergeyev said the best help that Russia could provide would be to cease its support for rebel groups and to stop "flooding" Ukraine with weapons.

Russia's Vitaly Churkin raised little objection to the Ukrainian envoy's charges that armed men were pouring in across the border to fight against Ukraine's government, or that a number of Russian citizens were at the helm of the rebel movement.

Instead, he said Ukraine should pull back its security forces and focus on the run-down region's economic problems, before Moscow would help it arrange a "dialogue" with separatists.

On the eve of the Security Council meeting, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk appealed to Russia and "personally" to its President Vladimir Putin to denounce "terrorists" and to seal the border with Ukraine to block infiltration by armed militias, Ukraine's UNN reported.

"If Russia gets out of the game, we will resolve the situation in eastern Ukraine within a week or two," Yatsenyuk's press service quoted him as saying, according to UNN. "But when Russia supports and finances terrorists, grants them access to the Ukrainian territory, this creates enormous difficulties."

Russia reportedly still has thousands of troops lined up along Ukraine's eastern border, despite signs of a pullback following Putin's promise last week to withdraw his forces. But the troops and Russian border patrols appear to present little hindrance to armed groups that cross into Ukraine.

In remarks Wednesday at the West Point Military Academy, President Barack Obama said that "in Ukraine, Russia's recent actions recall the days when Soviet tanks rolled into Eastern Europe," according to a transcript published by the White House.

Moscow denies accusations of stoking unrest, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated the call for an "immediate cessation on Kiev's punitive operation in the southeastern regions" during a phone conversation Wednesday with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the Foreign Ministry said in an online statement.

The violence that has increasingly resembled a smoldering civil war in Ukraine has stoked a full-fledged diplomatic clash at the UN, with the Russian and Ukrainian ambassadors repeatedly taking the floor to address the 15-member Security Council.

Sergeyev said Russia's involvement amounted to "mercenary activities" and that the "stoking of the flames of separatism has been going on for a long time."

Churkin brushed off the accusation, saying that he would not respond to the "pseudo-facts" that implicate his government.

When Sergeyev conceded that eastern Ukraine has been plagued by economic hardships that successive administrations have failed to resolve during the past 20 years, Churkin pummeled on, saying the economy was the issue on which Ukraine should focus, instead of blaming Russia.

The Ukrainian ambassador "does not know his own people," Churkin said, attributing the separatist movement to the ouster of Ukraine's previous, Moscow-backed administration after months of street protests.

"Eastern Ukraine has exploded after the coup that took place in Kiev in February," Churkin said. "We all know that, and our Ukrainian colleague also knows it, but he doesn't want to acknowledge that."

Sergeyev pointed out the recent arrival of fighters from Chechnya to join what Moscow has painted as the struggle of downtrodden ethnic Russians against Ukraine's "fascists."

"I have posed a question many times: What are hundreds of armed Chechens doing in Ukraine? Did they come to protect the Ukrainian Orthodoxy or the Slavic unity?" Sergeyev said in a sarcastic remark.

Churkin brushed off what he described as "pointless" and "ironic comments about Chechens," adding that he refused to be "bogged down in that topic."

The spat came at the end of a nearly two-hour meeting, during which UN political chief Jeffrey Feltman called for a peaceful solution.

"The secretary-general is concerned by reports of scores of casualties, by suggestions regarding the circulation and use of heavier weaponry in the east, and by allegations of arms, fighters, and trucks entering Ukraine," Feltman, the UN's under-secretary-general for political affairs, told the council.

British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant said a high turnout at Sunday's presidential election was a "powerful rebuke" to rebel attempts to derail the democratic process, and that the vote had opened up a "genuine opportunity for all Ukrainians to resolve their grievances peacefully."

"There can therefore be no justification for armed groups to continue to press their cause through violence," Grant said. "We therefore call on the insurgents to lay down their arms, renounce violence, and join in this debate."

A number of Security Council members sided with Ukraine, expressing support for its right to protect its territorial integrity, but Churkin pressed on with his offers to help negotiate peace, as long as Ukraine agreed to play along.

"Russia has not brought about what had happened in Ukraine but would contribute to the search for a solution if the new president made the right decision," Churkin said.

See also:
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