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Medvedev: U.S. 'Infinitely Cynical' to Suggest Ukraine Refugees Visiting Their Grannies

By Jennifer Monaghan

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Refugees from eastern Ukraine sit on their beds inside a school building, which is currently being used as a temporary shelter, in the village of Grigoropolisskaya, northwest of the Russian southern city of Stavropol.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has lashed out at a U.S. State Department spokeswoman for suggesting some of the supposed refugees fleeing war-torn Ukraine for Russia could be going to visit their grandmothers.

Spokeswoman Marie Helf on Tuesday played down a report by the UN's Refugee Agency, or UNHCR, saying its figures had come "directly from Russian government sources who ... have not always been entirely accurate," according to a copy of the press briefing posted on the U.S. State Department's website.

Helf said the UNHCR report showed 110,000 people "had crossed the border at some point. That could be to go visit their grandmother and come back ... only 9,600 people have actually applied for asylum in Russia."

The comments appear to have hit a nerve with Medvedev, who called out the U.S.' "cynicism" in a comment posted Wednesday on his Facebook page.

"There are a huge number of refugees. Tens of thousands. People are fleeing from war. American propaganda claims they were going "on holiday to their grandmothers." [Such] cynicism knows no bounds," Medvedev wrote.

Medvedev also commented on the decision by Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko on Monday to end a ceasefire in Ukraine's east, saying the Ukrainian leader would now "personally answer" for any further victims in the fighting between government forces and armed pro-Russian separatists.

The UNHCR's report, published online last Friday, said that while many of the 110,000 people fleeing Ukraine for Russia had not sought asylum, they were "seeking other forms of legal stay, often we are told because of concerns about complications or reprisals in case of return to Ukraine."

The report also noted that the organization was "unable to verify all information on displacement" and so "had to rely on local and central authorities; partners; and civil society organizations."

See also:

UN Says More Than 16,000 People Fled East Ukraine in Past Week

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