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Foreign Ministry Lashes Out at Moscow Correspondents

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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An official claimed about 40 journalists were invited on the press tour. Of the foreigners, only Bloomberg came.

In another flare-up of tensions over media coverage of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia's Foreign Affairs Ministry on Wednesday accused Western journalists in Moscow of skipping a trip arranged by the ministry to the Russia-Ukraine border because it would not fit in with their publications' narrative.

The trip was set up hastily Monday following reports that more than 300 Ukrainian soldiers had crossed into Russia to seek refuge. Journalists were invited to take a Defense Ministry transport plane to the Rostov region, see the Ukrainian soldiers and return to Moscow the same day, according to Maria Zakharova, deputy head of the ministry's press office.

The Ukrainian government acknowledged Monday that 311 soldiers had been forced into Russian territory when they ran out of ammunition and were facing encirclement

from pro-Russia insurgents, Reuters reported.

According to Zakharova, journalists from CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Christian Science Monitor decided to skip the trip to the camp where the soldiers were being housed, "because, as we understand, their editors told them not to go." She said only one U.S. news outlet — Bloomberg — went on the trip.

"When I called The New York Times' correspondent in Moscow, he said that he would go but his editors would not publish such material," Zakharova said in a phone interview.

Neil MacFarquhar, Moscow bureau chief of The New York Times, said Wednesday his newspaper had not gone on the trip "because there was only one reporter in Moscow on Monday and we were given almost zero advance notice that the trip was happening."

"As I told the Foreign Ministry at the time, we scrambled to reach another reporter but could not within the couple hours' notice given for the trip," he said.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed Zakharova's complaint later Wednesday, repeating her claim that Reuters had signed up for the trip then backtracked.

"The Reuters correspondent was already on his way to the airport after confirming his participation, but made a U-turn midway after probably getting a phone call from the management of this well-known independent news agency," Lavrov said. "This situation is evident to all honest people.

David Crundwell, head of corporate affairs at Reuters, said that the agency "did cover the event both for its television clients and text. We hope the ministry will amend its statement."

The foreign reporters mentioned by Zakharova confirmed to The Moscow Times that they had received an invitation on Monday, but said they could not make it due to time constraints.

"I am the only reporter here [in Moscow] and I had a full afternoon of meetings and a number of articles I was working on," said Michael Birnbaum, head of The Washington Post's Moscow bureau.

Birnbaum also dismissed Zakharova's accusations that the Western press has an anti-Russian bias in covering the Ukraine crisis.

"I would encourage her [Zakharova] to read our coverage, which I think is not biased, covers both sides and takes note of the terrible situation in the region with a lot of civilian victims involved. I have just been to Donetsk and we have a lot of people's voices from there who say they are very worried about the Ukrainian army's actions," he told The Moscow Times.

Yelena Berezovskaya, a representative of CNN's Moscow bureau, said CNN was unable to send anyone on the trip due to "technical reasons" and "time constraints."

Fred Weir of The Christian Science Monitor's Moscow bureau said that he had also received an invitation but could not accept it due to family commitments.

"I was not able to travel at short notice, that is why I declined the invitation, but I do realize there is a developing humanitarian situation of great scope over there," Weir told The Moscow Times.

"Certainly in the West, stories of refugees that tend to be bitter and angry about the Ukrainian army might not be welcome," he said.

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