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Moscow Red Cross Sues 17 News Agencies for Defamation Over Aid Convoy Reports

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The Moscow Red Cross has appealed to Roskomnadzor in a further bid to restrict online access to what it referred to as the “extremist resources.”

Angered over what it claims are deceptive news reports on Russia's aid convoys to east Ukraine, the Moscow branch of the Russian Red Cross has filed a 170 million ruble ($2.6 million) defamation case against 17 international news outlets.

The humanitarian organization, which is unaffiliated with the better-known Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross, has turned to a Moscow court with the claim that media coverage of a recent interview had violated its "dignity, honor and business reputation," according to a statement released by the group Wednesday.

"We have come to a point where the things that were being written (by reporters) were never

said," Igor Trunov, a controversial figure at the helm of the Moscow Red Cross, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday. "Suing one journalist or organization will not solve the problem."

Loaded Questions, Loaded Answers

At the heart of the lawsuit is a statement attributed to Trunov during a Dec. 25 press conference, where he had reportedly said that Russian aid convoys to war-torn east Ukraine could have transported arms and ammunitions to the rebel fighters there.

The Moscow Red Cross claims that Vitaly Sych, a journalist with Ukrainian state news agency Ukrinform, asked Trunov at the conference what could explain the "renewed" vigor of the Ukrainian military after the arrival of humanitarian convoys from Kiev to eastern Ukraine in late November.

Trunov claims it was a loaded question, meant to insinuate that humanitarian convoys may be sent to the region carrying weapons and ammunition. He responded to the journalist that weapons had "likely" been carried by Kiev-sponsored humanitarian convoys, constituting an "indirect violation of international humanitarian law," according to the Moscow Red Cross.

Trunov was also quoted by Ukrinform as saying that Russian humanitarian convoys could supply east Ukrainian rebels with "anything, including weapons and ammunition," a statement Trunov vehemently denies having made.

A few hours following the press conference, Ukrinform published an article entitled: "Putin's 'Humanitarian Convoys' Likely Carrying Weapons — Moscow Red Cross." Trunov maintains the story did not reflect his comments.

The Moscow Red Cross claims that other online publications cited and engaged in the "criminal paraphrasing" of the information that Ukrinform reported had emerged from the press conference.

"An information and sanctions war is being waged against Russia," the Moscow Red Cross said in a statement. "War is a path of deception ... informational warfare, lies and slander."

Ukrinform could not be reached for comment.

Official Russia Reacts

The Russian Foreign Ministry chastised Trunov in the aftermath of the press conference, saying the alleged statements were "irresponsible" and could "only cause regret."

"Mr. Trunov's statement about the alleged 'invasion' of Ukraine by a Russian paramilitary formation indicates that there are some gaps in his knowledge of international humanitarian assistance," the ministry's statement read. "It is worldwide practice to use emergency response units when the situation demands it, and the situation in Ukraine's southeast certainly qualifies as an emergency."

Trunov told The Moscow Times he had scoured the Internet for any media outlets that had

misquoted him.

The majority of the news organizations in question — 13 of them — are Ukrainian. Two American publications also landed on the list: Newsweek and The Interpreter. A Russian online news site based in the far-eastern city Khabarovsk and the Vilnius-based news site of the International Consortium EuroBelarus are also listed among the defendants in the case.

The Moscow Red Cross has also appealed to Russia's media watchdog, Roskomnadzor, as well as the prosecutor general, in a further bid to restrict online access to what it referred to as the "extremist resources" published by these media outlets.

While Moscow has reiterated that the humanitarian convoys it has dispatched to eastern Ukraine in recent months are solely designed to assuage the suffering of civilians in war-torn areas, the West had expressed fears that such consignments could contain materiel for rebels.

In addition to heading the humanitarian organization, Trunov is a lawyer who has had his share of media coverage in the past, having developed a reputation for working on the sort of high-profile legal cases that tend to attract vast media coverage. The head of the Moscow Red Cross has had several of his own run-ins with the law. In the early 1990s, before practicing law, he served 3 1/2 years in prison in connection with a real estate scandal, Russian media have reported.

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