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# Finland's Military Denies Russia Concerns After Contacting Reservists

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Finnish Border Guard ship, Turva, is seen guarding the waters near Helsinki, Apr. 28.

HELSINKI — The Finnish military began sending letters to some 900,000 reservists on Monday in the largest campaign of its kind, amid increased tensions between the Nordic states and Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

The military said the letter campaign, which aims to improve communication with former army conscripts, was prompted mainly by cuts in the defense budget and was not a response to a more assertive Russia, with which Finland shares an 833 mile (1,340 km) land border.

But the move also comes at a time when Russian air force sorties, spy accusations and military border exercises have prompted a debate within non-aligned Finland about how to boost its security arrangements and whether it should even join NATO.

Last month, Finland and similarly neutral Sweden joined with NATO members Norway, Denmark and Iceland in an unprecedentedly hawkish joint statement that directly cited the Russian "challenge" as grounds to boost defense cooperation.

Finland, one of few countries in Europe still to have compulsory military service for men, said the plan to improve coordination with reservists pre-dated the Ukraine crisis, which erupted last year when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea region.

"The aim is to update reservists about their wartime roles and assignments and to open up interaction on how their know-how has developed," said military spokesman Mika Kalliomaa.

He attributed the timing of the campaign mainly to recent defense budget cuts that had changed assignments and locations for many reservists.

The army has shut several training sites and cut hundreds of jobs in recent years as Finland's economy has worsened. The defense budget this year has shrunk to 2.7 billion euros ($2.99 billion), or 1.29 percent of GDP, down from 1.4 percent in 2012.

From the start of this year, the size of the wartime army was cut to 230,000 from 350,000. But the army and many politicians have started calling for an increase in defense spending due to the worsening regional security climate.

Finland was part of the Russian Empire in tsarist times and fought the Soviet Union during World War II. Today Russia is an important trade partner and opinion polls show public support for joining NATO remains relatively weak despite concerns about Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

Last week, the Finnish navy fired handheld underwater depth charges as a warning against a suspected submarine near Helsinki. An investigation is continuing.

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