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Moscow Admits Two Fighters Captured in Ukraine Are Ex-Russian Soldiers

By Anna Dolgov

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A Ukrainian military commander shows off a rifle taken from a captured Russian soldier at a press conference on Monday. **Gleb Garanich**

Russia's Defense Ministry has identified two fighters captured in Ukraine as former servicemen in the Russian military — a concession that echoes rights advocates' claims that Moscow has been discharging its soldiers from the army before sending them to fight alongside separatists in the Donbass.

The fighters, Alexander Alexandrov and Yevgeny Yerofeyev, whom Ukrainian forces captured in the rebel-controlled Luhansk region, "were not active servicemen in the Russian armed forces at the moment of their capture on May 17," Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Monday.

However, "we have checked up on the information of the Ukrainian side — these boys previously have in fact served in one of the Russian military units and have military training,"

Konashenkov said, according to comments carried by Russia's major state-run news agencies.

It remained unclear when the men might have been discharged from the Russian military. Separatists in Luhansk claimed that the fighters were serving in rebel "militia" and have released photos of their rebel-issued military IDs, both dated this year.

Ukraine has identified the fighters as officers from the GRU, the foreign military intelligence branch of Russia's army, and released a video with the men saying they had been part of a Russian special forces spying mission. In the video, which could not be independently verified, Alexandrov also says that his group has been in eastern Ukraine since earlier this year.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, asked to comment, said: "Both we and the Defense Ministry have said multiple times that there are no Russian servicemen in the Donbass."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has also repeatedly denied the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine.
"I am telling you openly and unambiguously: There are no Russian troops in Ukraine," Putin said during his annual televised call-in show last month.

Putin had also denied the presence of Russian troops in Crimea ahead of Moscow's annexation of the peninsula from Ukraine in March 2014 only to acknowledge it afterward.

The Defense Ministry's latest claim about the identity of the Russian fighters jibes with an account provided in a report released last week by allies of murdered opposition leader Boris Nemtsov.

Based on interviews with Russian troops and their representatives, the report claims that this year, Moscow started discharging its soldiers from the army before sending them to Ukraine and then declining military benefits to the families of soldiers who were killed in the conflict.

The practice marked a shift from Moscow's alleged handling of the fighting in Ukraine last year, when Russia deployed active servicemen across the border, the report said. At that time, soldiers' families received military benefits in exchange for keeping silent about the circumstances in which their loved ones died, the report said.

Ukraine intends to prosecute the captured fighters for "terrorist acts," the head of Ukraine's Security Service, Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, said Monday.

Ukrainian Interior Ministry adviser Anton Gerashchenko has suggested that after the men stand trial, they could be exchanged for Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, who is currently in prison in Moscow, as well as another 400 Ukrainian prisoners held by Russia.

The Russian Defense Ministry is "counting on" Ukraine to free the two fighters, its spokesman said, TASS news agency reported.

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