

Defense Ministry Denies Soldiers Are Deserting for Fear of Being Sent to Ukraine

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The Defense Ministry says it is investigating four soldiers on suspicion of having gone AWOL from their base in southern Russia, but denied reports that the number of troops who had allegedly fled the base to avoid being sent to fight in Ukraine had reached several dozen.

The ministry's Southern Military District named four men it said were accused of having fled the base in the Rostov region near the border with Ukraine as Anatoly Kudrin, Ivan Shevkunov, Pavel Tynchenko and Alexander Yenenko, according to a statement quoted over the weekend by Ekho Moskvyy radio.

All four had been identified earlier this weekend by the Gazeta.ru news website as contract servicemen who were supposedly among “several dozen” men who allegedly fled the base to avoid being sent to eastern Ukraine, where pro-Moscow separatists are fighting Kiev's government forces.

Kudrin has already been convicted of going AWOL and sentenced to six months in a penal colony, according to Gazeta.ru. New investigations reportedly involve the graver charge of desertion, which is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

“People came to the base urging [servicemen] to go to Ukraine,” Kudrin was quoted by Gazeta.ru as saying. “Being at the base was unbearable, and besides I was afraid of being sent by force to the Donbass [the part of Ukraine where the fighting is].”

The “main incentive” offered by the recruiters was the promise soldiers would be paid 8,000 rubles (\$142) for each day they served in eastern Ukraine, Kudrin was quoted as saying.

Some of the men tried to resign from the military or request a transfer back to the city of Maikop in the Russian region of Adygea, where their units were based, before deciding to go AWOL from Rostov and travel to Maikop, according to Gazeta.ru,

Tynchenko, a soldier who also stands accused of disobeying orders, protested the charge in a statement to a Maikop military court, Gazeta.ru reported, including a copy of the handwritten note.

“I disobeyed a criminal order because I did not want to violate the oath I had taken and did not want to participate in military action on the territory of Ukraine,” the note reads.

The Maikop military court issued more than 60 rulings on AWOL cases in the first six months of this year — nearly twice the number of such rulings in all of the four years from 2010 to 2014, according to the court's official publications.

A lawyer who represents five contract soldiers in criminal cases against them, Tatyana Chernetskaya indicated that the number of cases currently open is even higher, according to Gazeta.ru.

“The young men report that the military unit commander says the military investigative department can't handle the workload, there are so many criminal cases,” Chernetskaya was quoted as saying. “The lads get assigned numbers 101, 137 in the line of criminal cases being opened, they get their number and wait to be summoned by investigators.”

Moscow denies mounting accusations of sending troops to fight alongside separatists in eastern Ukraine, and claims that soldiers who have been captured by Ukrainian forces in the region had resigned from the Russian army and were there on a voluntary basis.

A report released by the associates of slain opposition politician Boris Nemtsov earlier this year claimed that the Russian military was sending active servicemen into Ukraine last year, but as the costs of the conflict mounted, began discharging men from the army before deploying them across the border this year, to avoid paying military wages.

As the conflict rages on, more than a year after it erupted, stories have begun circulating among servicemen that the military was allegedly reneging on the pay it had promised and disowning captive or dead soldiers, according to an unidentified serviceman quoted by Gazeta.ru.

“My comrades got calls from other contract soldiers who tried to talk them out of it: If

something happens in Ukraine, they will discharge you retroactively or list you as a deserter who ran off and accidentally got blown up by a mine,” the serviceman was quoted as saying.

The contact servicemen who were tempted into agreeing by the pay of 8,000 rubles (\$142) per day promised by recruiters never received the money, he added, Gazeta.ru reported.

Two Russians captured recently by Kiev forces in eastern Ukraine — Alexander Alexandrov and Yevgeny Yerofeyev — have insisted they were on active duty in the Donbass and appealed to Moscow for support. The Russian Defense Ministry says the men had resigned from the army before going across the border.

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