

Russia Disowns Soldiers Captured in Eastern Ukraine in May

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A man, who according to Ukraine's state security service (SBU) is named Alexander Alexandrov and is one of two Russian servicemen detained by Ukrainian forces, speaks during an interview with Reuters at a hospital in Kiev, Ukraine, May 28, 2015.

Russia's Defense Ministry has formally disowned two soldiers captured in eastern Ukraine, saying the men had resigned from the army before crossing the border and their mission had "no connection" with Moscow's armed forces.

The soldiers, Alexander Alexandrov and Yevgeny Yerofeyev, have both insisted that they were on active duty in the Russian military when Ukrainian government forces captured them in the separatist-controlled Luhansk region in May. In a letter to a human rights advocate published by the Gazeta.ru news portal Tuesday night, the Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged that the men had been contract soldiers, but said they had resigned.

"Events connected with their departure from the Russian Federation and their presence on

the territory of Ukraine took place after their resignation from military service and have no connection with it," the letter read.

The letter came in response to a query by Sergei Krivenko, a member of the Kremlin's human rights council who heads the council's citizen and army group for monitoring Russian military affairs and protecting soldiers' rights.

Russia has repeatedly denied accusations by Ukraine and Western governments that it has supplied troops and weapons to separatist insurgents in eastern Ukraine.

Shortly after Alexandrov and Yerofeyev were captured on May 16 and identified themselves as Russian soldiers on active duty, a Defense Ministry spokesman claimed that the men had resigned from the army. Prominent soldiers' rights group the Union of Soldiers Mothers' Committee cast doubt on that account while the soldiers themselves, who are being charged with terrorism in Ukraine, insisted in subsequent interviews that they were on military duty.

Alexandrov has also said that he would like to be treated as a prisoner of war, but that designation is difficult to receive unless Moscow recognizes him as an active-duty soldier.

Alexandrov and Yerofeyev were both injured before their capture, and were treated in a Ukrainian hospital. During interviews with Russian and foreign media and envoys from international organizations, they maintained they had no complaints about their treatment or the conditions of their detention.

Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, head of the Russian think tank Academy of Geopolitical Problems, said that if the men were on active duty, Moscow should have done a better job standing behind them, Gazeta.ru reported.

"When we disown our soldiers, if they were indeed ours, that's not good," Ivashov was quoted as saying.

Instead, he suggested, the Defense Ministry "should have said that we are conducting intelligence operations, because there is a civil war going on and military action continues near Russia's borders," Gazeta.ru reported.

In videotaped interviews after they were captured, Alexandrov and Yerofeyev said they were part of a Russian special forces' spying mission in eastern Ukraine.

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