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Mercenaries Hurt in U.S. Syria Strikes Are Treated at Russian Defense Hospitals

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Khalil Ashawi / Reuters

(Bloomberg) — Even as the Kremlin denies any official link to them, scores of Russian mercenaries wounded in U.S. strikes in Syria are being treated at Defense Ministry hospitals.

The wounded were brought to military hospitals in Moscow and St. Petersburg, according to two people in contact with them, after more than 200 fighters died in last week's failed assault on a base held by U.S.-backed forces in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor region.

The death toll's rising as some of the wounded succumb to their injuries, according to one of the people. Russia's denied any official involvement. There's no "specific detailed information" on what happened and while there may be Russian citizens in Syria, "they don't belong to the Russian armed forces," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call Wednesday.

The incident shines a light on a little-known weapon in the Kremlin's hybrid-war arsenal. Mercenaries, who've been active in the conflicts in eastern Ukraine and Syria, allow Russia to deny official involvement in operations when things go wrong.

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Fighters involved in the Feb. 7 assault in Syria were linked to Wagner, two people familiar with the matter said, a shadowy private military contractor which has a training camp at a commando base in southern Russia.

The U.S. Treasury named Dmitry Utkin as Wagner's leader last June as it sanctioned him for sending fighters to eastern Ukraine. Utkin was photographed next to President Vladimir Putin at a Kremlin reception in late 2016, held to honor him and others for their service to Russia, for which they have received state awards, according to Peskov.

Wagner is made up of detachments that may be controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a wealthy businessman who's been dubbed "Putin's Cook" because his company provides catering services to the Kremlin, according to the Fontanka news service.

Prigozhin, who's denied any links to Wagner, was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury in 2016, which said he has "extensive business dealings" with the Russian Defense Ministry.

In what may be the deadliest clash between citizens of the former Cold War foes, the Deir Ezzor attack involved hundreds of Russian and Ukrainian mercenaries, who were fighting for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, according to the two Russians.

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Wagner's troops in Syria, which have numbered up to 2,000, took part in fighting to reclaim the ancient city of Palmyra in 2016 and 2017. It's suffered substantial casualties, say activists who track the war.

The use of mercenaries, which remains illegal in Russia despite some talk of regulating it, allows Russia to avoid reporting casualties, according to Mark Galeotti, a senior research fellow at the Institute of International Relations in Prague. Officially, 44 Russian servicemen have died in Syria, including the pilot of a warplane shot down this month by militants.

"Of course it's bad when Russians die from American weapons and we can't say it will have a good impact on our relations," said Vitaly Naumkin, a senior adviser to the Russian government on Syria. "We're dealing with an unusual situation," though it shouldn't be blown out of proportion, he said.

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The fighters had no air cover or mobile air defense to protect them during the fighting, they said. A U.S. official put the death toll at 100, with 200 to 300 injured, but was unable to say how many were Russian. Assad may have hired Wagner to recapture and guard Syrian energy

assets in return for lucrative oil concessions, according to Russian media reports.

Around 600 fighters with artillery and tanks, most Russian-speakers, took part in the attempt to storm the base, according to one of the people familiar with the matter.

They counted on the U.S. having too little time to target them without risking casualties among its mainly Kurdish allies, but strikes began when only half the force had made it to the base, Kommersant newspaper reported, citing a former comrade of the mercenaries.

Russia's military has said it had nothing to do with the attack and the U.S. accepted the claim. "The Russians may have allowed the attack to take place simply to make it clear to Assad that you can't do things without coordination with Moscow," said Yury Barmin, a Middle East analyst at the Russian International Affairs Council, a research group set up by the Kremlin.

Two Trump administration officials said the U.S used a military hotline to communicate with the Russian side to warn that it was about to launch air strikes. The Russians later called their U.S. counterparts to ask if the strikes had ended so that the attacking force could recover the dead and wounded, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

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