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Russia Completes 10,000-Troop Drills Near Ukraine

By AFP

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Russia announced Saturday that more than 10,000 troops had finished month-long drills near Ukraine, amid Western accusations that Moscow was plotting an invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour.

The defense ministry said in a statement that the drills for Southern Military District forces had taken place in a host of southern regions including Rostov, Krasnodar and Crimea, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

But the drills also took place further afield, including in Stavropol, Astrakhan, North Caucasus republics and even in Russia's Caucasus ally Armenia.

The defense ministry said the troops were returning to their permanent bases and that stand-by units would be readied for the New Year's holidays.

Western countries have accused Russia of massing upwards of 100,000 troops near Ukraine ahead of a possible winter invasion.

According to Kiev's estimates, the number of Russian troops along Ukraine's borders has increased from around 93,000 troops in October to 104,000 now.

Russia says it is free to move its forces on its territory how it sees fit and denies that it is planning a large-scale attack.

It has presented the West with sweeping security demands, saying NATO must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics.

Tensions reached a boiling point on Wednesday when President Vladimir Putin said Russia would take "appropriate retaliatory" military steps in response to what he called the West's "aggressive stance".

But he lowered the volume the next day, saying he had seen a "positive" reaction from the United States to Russia's security proposals and said talks would take place next month.

In an interview on Friday, a senior Ukrainian security official told AFP that there is no risk of an imminent Russian invasion.

Kiev has been battling pro-Russia separatists since shortly after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 in a conflict that has claimed over 13,000 lives.

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