

Russia Says Pulling Back Some Forces from Ukraine Border

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Russian Defense Ministry / TASS

Russia said Tuesday it was pulling back some of its forces near the Ukrainian border to their bases, in what could be the first major step towards de-escalation in weeks of crisis with the West.

Moscow released few details and there was no immediate outside confirmation of the withdrawal, which the Kremlin said had always been planned despite Western "hysteria" over a feared invasion of Ukraine.

It came amid an intense diplomatic effort to avert a war in Europe after Russia amassed more than 100,000 troops on the borders of its pro-Western neighbor.

Western leaders accused Moscow of preparing for a possible invasion, a claim Russia repeatedly denied, and threatened wide-ranging sanctions if an attack took place.

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NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said in Brussels there were "grounds for cautious optimism" in signs coming from Russia, but warned: "We have not seen any sign of de-escalation on the ground."

In Moscow, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz became the latest world leader to meet Vladimir Putin in recent days, sitting for talks with the Kremlin leader that were to finish with a news conference later Tuesday.

On the streets of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, residents enjoying bright winter sunshine were warily optimistic, and grateful that Ukraine and its allies appeared to have held their nerve.

"There is no panic in society... You see how many people are walking around, they are all smiling, they are all happy," lawyer Artem Zaluznyi, 22, told AFP on the city's main thoroughfare, Khreschatyk Street.

But there was also caution, with many doubting that Russia would honor any promise to withdraw.

"To believe it fully would be neither smart nor wise," Zaluznyi said.

The crisis — the worst between Russia and the West since the Cold War ended — reached a peak this week, with U.S. officials warning a full-scale invasion, including an assault on Kyiv, was possible within days.

Washington took the dramatic step on Monday of relocating its embassy in Kyiv to the western city of Lviv, after previously urging U.S. citizens to leave Ukraine.

On Tuesday morning, the Russian Defense Ministry spokesman said some forces deployed near Ukraine had completed their exercises and were packing up to leave.

"Units of the southern and western military districts, having completed their tasks, have already begun loading onto rail and road transport and today they will begin moving to their military garrisons," the ministry's chief spokesman, Igor Konashenkov, said in a statement.

'Large-scale' drills continue

The ministry released a video that it said showed Russian tanks climbing on to rail cars to leave an area where drills had been taking place.

It was not immediately clear how many units were involved and what impact the withdrawals would have on the overall number of troops surrounding Ukraine, but it was the first announcement of a Russian drawdown in weeks.

Konashenkov said "large-scale" Russian military drills were continuing in many areas, including joint exercises in Belarus and naval exercises in the Black Sea and elsewhere.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova suggested Tuesday's news would show it was the West that had been ratcheting up tensions with its claims.

"February 15, 2022, will go down in history as the day Western war propaganda failed. Humiliated and destroyed without a single shot being fired," she wrote on social media.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the pullback was the "usual process" after military exercises and again blamed the West for the crisis.

"This is nothing but a totally unprecedented campaign to provoke tensions," he said, calling decisions to move embassies to western Ukraine "ostentatious hysteria."

'Believe what you see'

Ukraine said deterrence efforts against Russia appeared to be working but that it would watch to see if any Russian withdrawal was real.

"We have a rule: don't believe what you hear, believe what you see. When we see a withdrawal, we will believe in a de-escalation," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters.

And in a separate move that would be sure to anger Kyiv, Russia's parliament on Tuesday voted to urge Putin to recognize two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine as "sovereign and independent states."

This would allow Russia to abandon the Minsk agreements peace plan for eastern Ukraine and potentially move in Russian troops — giving Putin a strong card to play in any future negotiations with Kyiv.

Moscow has repeatedly blamed the crisis on the West, saying the United States and western Europe are ignoring Russia's legitimate security concerns on its doorstep.

The Kremlin insists NATO must give assurances Ukraine will never be admitted as a member and roll back its presence in several eastern European and ex-Soviet countries.

Russia already controls the Crimean Peninsula that it seized from Ukraine in 2014 and supports separatist forces who have taken control of parts of eastern Ukraine, in a conflict that has claimed more than 14,000 lives.

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