

Russian Authorities Detain, Threaten Soldiers Refusing to Fight in Ukraine

Servicemen from Buryatia have not been heard from since they tried to resign.

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Olga Maltseva / AFP

Russian contract soldiers who refused to continue fighting in Ukraine say their military commanders aren't allowing them to return home and are using threats and intimidation to force them back to the battlefield.

A group of servicemen of the 11th Guards Air Assault Brigade — a military unit from the Siberian republic of Buryatia deployed in Ukraine since the early days of Russia's invasion — put in their resignations earlier this month. But their request met with resistance from the military authorities.

“There were 78 [objectors] at first, but after several rounds of coercion the military command was able to bring that number to a minimum,” Vladimir Budaev, co-founder of the Free Buryatia Foundation, an anti-war organization that supports conscientious objectors and their relatives, told The Moscow Times.

After refusing to accept resignation requests, the brigade’s command divided the objectors into small groups of eight and ten men and sent them to a special detention facility in the Russia-occupied eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk, the mother of one of the soldiers, Oksana Plusnina, [said](#) in a video appeal distributed by Free Buryatia Foundation.

According to Plusnina, the soldiers don’t have their identity papers, which were taken by the command under the pretext of protecting them in case they were captured by the Ukrainian army. The soldiers have also been denied access to mobile phones and other means to contact their families or lawyers.

Before being detained and held incommunicado, Plusnina’s son, Ilya Kaminsky, [told](#) the Current Time TV channel that a group of his fellow servicemen who refused to fight was “kept locked up in a garage” and “fed some gruel once a day ” before being sent to a detention center.

Kaminsky also provided Current Time TV with an audio recording of the soldiers’ conversation with the brigade commander Lieutenant Colonel Agafonov, who tried to persuade them to rescind their resignations. Current Time TV censored Agafonov's obscenities.

“Eight people already [went to Luhansk] and now they really want to go back to the battlefield,” Agafonov is heard saying on the recording aired by Current Time. “I don’t know what they did or said to them.”

Kaminsky — who claimed to have written around 20 appeals for dismissal from the military — became unreachable soon after speaking to the channel.

“We are unable to talk to him or track where he is located right now or what is happening to him,” Plusnina said in the video posted last week.

According to Plusnina, the command has also threatened to “gather all the objectors and send them to the frontline” in an attempt to reverse their decision to leave the army for good.

“This is completely illegal, because termination of a contract with the Russian army is a lawful procedure. They are persons employed [by the state] who can [lawfully] refuse to follow the order at any point,” Budaev said.

Last week, the Free Buryatia Foundation [announced](#) that 150 soldiers from the Siberian republic who refused deployment in Ukraine returned home from the frontlines.

Their story gained publicity in June when the wives of the soldiers recorded a video appeal saying their husbands had not been brought home despite terminating their contracts.

The video initially had a reverse effect when the soldiers — who were already on the bus home — were sent back to Ukraine, while the wives were “talked to by the FSB,” according to

Budaev.

Whether the story of Kaminsky and the handful of soldiers who are still determined to leave Ukraine despite the pressure from their superiors will have a similar outcome is yet to be seen.

“As far as we know they are still detained and isolated somewhere near Luhansk,” Budaev told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Tuesday.

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