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North Korea Sold Arms to Russia's Wagner Group, U.S. Says

By AFP

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Russian Defense Ministry / TASS

North Korea has delivered arms to Russia's private military group Wagner, the White House said Thursday, calling the mercenary enterprise a "rival" for power to the defense and other ministries in the Kremlin.

The United States will boost sanctions against Wagner following North Korea's sale of infantry rockets and missiles to the group last month, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, said White House national security spokesman John Kirby.

"Wagner is searching around the world for arms suppliers to support its military operations in Ukraine," Kirby told reporters.

"We can confirm that North Korea has completed an initial arms delivery to Wagner, which paid for that equipment," he said.

According to Kirby the group, which is independent of the Russian defense establishment and is leading a bloody siege of Bakhmut, Ukraine, is spending more than $100 million each month in its Ukraine operations.

"Wagner is emerging as a rival power center to the Russian military and other Russian ministries," Kirby said.

'Sign of desperation'

In a statement carried by the Korean Central News Agency, the North Korean foreign ministry denied conducting any arms transaction with Russia, saying the story was "cooked up by some dishonest forces for different purposes."

However, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said the U.K. concurs with the American assessment that North Korea delivered arms to Russia for the Wagner group in violation of UN resolutions.

"The fact that President (Vladimir) Putin is turning to North Korea for help is a sign of Russia's desperation and isolation," Cleverly said in a statement.

"We will work with our partners to ensure that North Korea pays a high price for supporting Russia's illegal war in Ukraine."

Close to Putin

The Wagner group is controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman once called "Putin's chef" for his work catering dinners for the powerful leader before and after he became the Russian president.

A vocal critic of the Russian defense establishment's handling of the war in Ukraine, Prigozhin, 61, runs a number of diverse businesses out of his Concord Catering group in St. Petersburg.

One is the Internet Research Agency, the notorious St. Petersburg internet "troll farm" that conducted a massive online operation to interfere with the US elections to help then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016.

For that Prigozhin and several others in the operation were indicted in the United States in 2018.

Just last month, he boasted of the operation.

"We interfered, we are interfering and we will interfere," he said.

He has also been hit with U.S. and European Union sanctions several times, particularly for Wagner Group activities.

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The mercenary-like army has been carrying out operations — ostensibly private but implicitly approved by the Kremlin — in Syria, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic and other countries in Africa.

In several locations they have been accused of participating in atrocities. They have been accused of taking part with government forces in the massacre of 300 civilians in Moura, Mali in March 2022.

In Ukraine, the group has served as an elite special forces-type operation that has better training, equipment and supplies than the mainstream Russian military.

Convict recruits sent to front

Prigozhin himself reportedly dubbed the intense fight in Bakhmut a "meat grinder," saying it would destroy the Ukraine army.

But Wagner itself has taken significant casualties, and Prigozhin has relied on prisons to supply Wagner with convicts to fill out its ranks.

Kirby estimated that the Wagner force now numbers about 50,000, including 10,000 skilled "contractors" and 40,000 convicts.

In Bakhmut and other areas of heavy fighting, Ukraine forces say the relatively untrained convicts have been forced to the front, where many have been killed or injured.

According to U.S. information, Kirby said, 90 percent of the estimated 1,000 Wagner fighters killed in the fighting in recent weeks were convicts.

"It seems as though Mr. Prigozhin is willing to just throw Russian bodies into the meat grinder in Bakhmut," he said.

Kirby said Prigozhin appeared more interested in "influence peddling at the Kremlin" than protecting his troops.

"For him, it's all about how good he looks to Mr. Putin, and how well he's regarded at the Kremlin," Kirby said.

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