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U.S. Designates Russia's Wagner Mercenaries a 'Criminal Organization'

By AFP

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A Wagner soldier in the Ukrainian town of Soledar. **TASS**

The United States on Friday designated Russia's Wagner mercenary group a "transnational criminal organization," piling pressure on the private Russian army fighting in Ukraine.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said Wagner, controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman close to President Vladimir Putin, has about 50,000 fighters in Ukraine, 80% of them drawn from prisons.

Kirby showed U.S. intelligence photographs of North Korea supplying arms to Wagner for its Ukraine operations, and said the private army has become a rival to the formal Russian military.

The photographs, from Nov. 18-19, show Russian rail cars entering North Korea, picking up a load of infantry rockets and missiles, and returning to Russia, he said.

He said the U.S. Treasury was formally designating Wagner as a transnational criminal organization, putting it on the same level as Italian mafia groups and Japanese and Russian organized crime syndicates.

The designation will allow the wider application of sanctions on the group's sprawling global network, which includes mercenary operations as well as businesses in Africa and elsewhere.

Wagner "is a criminal organization that is committing widespread atrocities and human rights abuses," Kirby said.

"We will work relentlessly to identify, disrupt, expose and target those who are assisting Wagner."

Kirby also said the U.S. had presented its intelligence on Wagner's North Korean purchase to the United Nations Security Council's unit on North Korea sanctions.

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The arms transfers from North Korea are in direct violation of UN Security Council resolutions, Kirby said.

Kirby said there is evidence that Prigozhin's confidence in Wagner fighters' relative success in Ukraine has generated tensions in the Kremlin.

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

"Prigozhin is trying to advance his own interest in Ukraine and Wagner is making military decisions based largely on what they will generate for Prigozhin, in terms of positive publicity."

Prigozhin has claimed credit for Russian advances over several months towards the eastern Ukraine city of Bakhmut, including the capture last week of neighboring Soledar.

On Thursday, Prigozhin said in a press statement Russia has "a lot to learn" from Ukraine's army.

But he insisted "the settlement of Artemovsk will be captured," using the Russian name for Bakhmut.

Wagner was founded in 2014 and has been involved in conflicts in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

Wagner fighters are tough and disciplined, Prigozhin says, but are brutally punished if they flee the battle.

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But his infighting with other officials in the Kremlin could be hurting him.

According to the U.S. Institute for the Study of War, Putin "is increasingly siding with" Prigozhin's rivals in high-level power circles.

Putin has also not directly credited Wagner with the Bakhmut area successes, it noted.

"Putin is likely attempting to reduce Prigozhin’s prominence in favor of the re-emerging professional Russian military and Russian government officials," the group said Thursday.

Known as "Putin's chef" for having catered events for the Russian strongman since both were in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, Prigozhin, 61, has been in U.S. sights for years.

He was indicted by the U.S. Justice Department in 2018 for interference in the U.S. presidential election two years earlier by the Internet Research Agency and Concord Management and Consulting, two businesses he owns.

He and his companies are also under U.S. and European sanctions for various activities.

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