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Wagner Chief Is Still in Russia, Says Belarus Leader

By AFP

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Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. **Lev Borodin / TASS**

Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin is still in Russia and none of the mercenary group's fighters have set up in Belarus, its president said Thursday, casting doubt on a Kremlin deal to end their insurrection.

"As far as Prigozhin is concerned, he is in St. Petersburg... He is not in Belarus," Alexander Lukashenko told reporters.

He spoke to a group of international and Belarusian journalists, including AFP, in a three-and-a-half-hour roundtable interview at the presidential Palace of Independence in Minsk.

Lukashenko said he knew "for sure" that Prigozhin was a free man, adding: "I spoke to him on the phone yesterday."

He also said Wagner members had not set up a base in Belarus yet, despite an offer from the

Kremlin for those who took part in the failed mutiny to do so.

"At the moment the question of their transfer and set-up has not been decided," Lukashenko said.

The decision is not up to him, but to Moscow, he said.

Prigozhin launched a mutiny against Russia's military leadership on June 23 and sent an armed column toward Moscow in the biggest challenge to President Vladimir Putin's leadership.

'Not worried'

Some 24 hours later, the Kremlin said the crisis had been resolved thanks to mediation from Lukashenko, with Prigozhin due to depart for Belarus.

Since then, Russian authorities have shut down or raided Prigozhin's businesses.

Images broadcast by Russian media on Wednesday showed police entering Prigozhin's residence, a vast and luxurious mansion with a helicopter parked in the grounds, reportedly on June 25.

The images showed police discovering wads of rubles and dollars, gold ingots, assault weapons, a closet full of wigs and several passports in Prigozhin's name but with photos of different people.

Lukashenko said he was "not worried or concerned" about hosting Wagner troops in his country and said they could instead be an asset.

He said that, if the Wagner troops were to move to Belarus, they would be required to sign contracts with the Belarusian government.

"I do not think that Wagner will rise up and turn its guns against the Belarusian state," he said.

"If we need to activate these units, we will activate them immediately and their experience will be very much appreciated."

'Won't bump him off'

He also spoke about ties between Prigozhin and Putin.

"I don't know everything about the relationship between Putin and Prigozhin and I don't want to know everything," he said.

"Putin knows Prigozhin much better than me," he said, adding: "Do you think Putin is so vindictive that he'll bump him off tomorrow? No, that's not going to happen."

Lukashenko, one of Putin's closest allies in the conflict, has let his country be used as a staging ground for the Ukraine offensive.

But he insisted that Belarusian forces would not be involved in the Ukraine conflict.

"Nothing... can force me to do that. There is no need for it," he said.

He also said that tactical nuclear warheads transferred by Russia to Belarus only had a "defensive purpose."

"We are not planning to attack anyone with nuclear weapons," he said, adding however that there would be an "immediate" response if Belarus was attacked.

The Belarus leader said the tactical weapons would be deployed in their entirety to his country by the end of the year.

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