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Finnish Military Assisting With Fence Construction Along Border With Russia

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Russian-Finnish border. **Olle Gustavsson (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

The Finnish Defense Forces are helping the country's Border Guard construct temporary fences on the Russian border after the Finnish government closed four border crossing points in response to an increased flow of third-country asylum seekers coming from Russia.

Since September, over 300 undocumented asylum seekers, mostly young men from the Middle East, have arrived at the Finland-Russia border, mostly at the four southern crossings that have now been closed.

Kainuu Border Guard deputy commander Tomi Tirkkonen told Finnish public broadcaster Yleisradio Oy that the Defense Forces were only helping with construction, not providing military assistance.

"The situation is completely under the control of the Border Guard," he told Yle.

Russia denied on Monday accusations that it was sending migrants to the Finnish border.

"We do not accept such accusations," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"Border crossings are used by those who have the right to do so," he added, calling Finland's accusations "far-fetched."

Russia warned earlier that Finland could close all its border crossings.

"Such a decision would obviously contradict Finland's national interests," Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told Russian news agencies.

Finnish Prime Minister Prime Minister Petteri Orpo has accused Russia of deliberately seeking to destabilize his country in response to its joining NATO earlier this year.

Starting Monday, Finland will lead its first major joint naval exercise since joining the alliance. About 4,000 troops from various allies, including the U.S., will participate in drills in southern Finland and the Baltic Sea.

Related article: Finland Shutters 4 Russian Border Crossings to Curb Asylum Seekers

Tensions on Finland's eastern border have escalated as asylum seekers continued to try to cross into the country via the closed border crossings. Border guards forcefully stopped one group, including using a gas spray on one person.

One border station director told Yle that the Russian authorities were pushing asylum seekers through their side of the border and closing the gates behind them so they could not return to Russia.

They added that there were signs some people were being forced to cross against their will.

Other asylum seekers crossed through the forest near the border crossings.

About 200 kilometers of permanent border fences are planned to be erected in the coming years.

Some 200 to 300 people protested Sunday afternoon in the Finnish city of Lappeenranta, calling for at least one of the southern border crossings to be reopened so they could maintain contact with friends and family in Russia.

AFP contributed reporting.

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