

World Scrambles as Russia Tightens Grip on Crimea

PEREVALNE, Ukraine March 2, 2014 (AP)

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Igniting a tense standoff, Russian forces surrounded a Ukrainian army base Sunday just as the country began mobilizing its military in response to the surprise Russian takeover of the Crimean Peninsula. Outrage over Russia's tactics mounted in world capitals, with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry calling on President Vladimir Putin to pull back from "an incredible act of aggression."

Fearing that Europe's borders were being rewritten by force, world leaders rushed to find a diplomatic solution to reverse what had already happened on the ground: Russia had captured the Black Sea peninsula on Saturday without firing a shot.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said there was no reason for Russia to invade Ukraine and warned that "we are on the brink of disaster."

"We believe that our western partners and the entire global community will support the territorial integrity and unity of Ukraine," he said Sunday in Kiev.

Still, politicians tread carefully, knowing it was a very delicate time for Europe.

"We are on a very dangerous track of increasing tensions," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said.

"(But) it is still possible to turn around. A new division of Europe can still be prevented."

But so far, Ukraine's new government and other countries have been powerless to counter Russian military tactics. Armed men in uniforms without insignia have moved freely about Crimea for days, occupying airports, smashing equipment at an air base and besieging a Ukrainian infantry base.

Putin has defied calls from the West to pull back his troops, insisting that Russia has a right to protect its interests and those of Russian-speakers in Crimea and elsewhere in Ukraine. Russia has long wanted to reclaim the lush Crimean Peninsula, which was part of its territory until 1954.

Russian troops pulled up to the Ukrainian military base at Perevalne on the Crimean Peninsula in a convoy Sunday that included at least 13 trucks and four armored vehicles with mounted machine guns. The trucks carried 30 soldiers each and had Russian license plates.

In response, a dozen Ukrainian soldiers, some with clips in their rifles, placed a tank at the base's gate, leaving the two sides in a tense standoff. It appeared to be the first known case of outmatched Ukrainians standing up to Russian military might.

A convoy of hundreds of Russian troops was also seen heading toward Simferopol, the regional capital of Crimea. Armed men in military uniforms without markings were seen in Simferopol's central plaza, Lenin Square, outside its Council of Ministers building.

In Brussels, NATO's secretary general said Russia had violated the U.N. charter with its military action in Ukraine, and he urged Moscow to "de-escalate the tensions." Ukraine is not a NATO member, meaning the U.S. and Europe are not obligated to come to its defense. But Ukraine has taken part in some alliance military exercises and contributed troops to its response force.

President Barack Obama spoke with Putin by telephone for 90 minutes Saturday and expressed his "deep concern" about "Russia's clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity," the White House said. Obama warned that Russia's "continued violation of international law will lead to greater political and economic isolation."