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Russian troops seize military airport in Crimea: Ukraine

2/28/2014

Ukraine's new Interior Minister Arsen Avakov says Russian troops have taken control of a military airport in Ukraine's autonomous Crimea territory.

Avakov wrote in a Facebook post on Friday that the Belbek international airport was blocked by military units of the Russian navy.

The troops have reportedly surrounded the military airport near the port of Sevastopol, where the Russian Black Sea fleet has a base. According to reports, the Russian troops have not entered the military base so far but are backed by armored personnel carriers.

However, Russia's Interfax news agency quoted an unnamed source as saying that the country's Black Sea Fleet forces have not seized Belbek airfield or taken any other action there.

Earlier on Friday, a group of armed men in military uniforms briefly seized an airport in the regional capital of Crimea. Eyewitness said about 50 gunmen in military uniforms arrived at Simferopol international airport in military trucks to search for Ukrainian airborne troops.

The group, however, left after finding out that Ukrainian military forces were not present on the tarmac. According to some reports, the armed men are still patrolling the airport, letting flights go ahead.

The airport incident comes after dozens of gunmen seized the government and parliament buildings in Simferopol in Crimea and hoisted Russian flags above the government headquarters on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expressed grave concern over the situation in Crimea, saying it was sending an envoy to the autonomous region.

Unrest erupted in Ukraine in November 2013, when President Viktor Yanukovich refrained from signing an Association Agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia.

On February 23, the Ukrainian parliament ousted Yanukovich and named Oleksandr Turchynov, the legislature's newly-elected speaker, as interim president.