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As Russia formally annexes Crimea, Ukraine considers its lack of military options

By Roy Gutman and Matt Schofield

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With Russia military maneuvering near Ukraine's eastern border raising the specter of a land grab even bigger than Moscow's taking of Crimea, the outmatched Ukrainian military on Friday decided to show the flag with a military move of its own – opening a new base close to the frontier.

But the deployment of 1,200 reservists less than a mile from the international boundary won't present much of a problem for Russian military planners if President Vladimir Putin decides to use his overwhelming superior force to invade.

In place of dragons' teeth to protect the entrance to the base there was a pile of stones. The front gate and the flagpoles were made from felled trees. For mobility, the Ukrainians had only two armored personnel carriers, both BTR-90s dating from the Soviet era, plus a small fleet of Land Rovers and other four-wheel-drive vehicles.

“We will need to use our brains and our hearts to protect the border,” said Olev Ivashenko, a mid-rank officer in charge of one of the armored vehicles. “We are here to show we will defend our country.”

But, he added, “We are here for security, not for fighting.”

Friday, Russia officially assumed control of Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula its forces have controlled since the end of February.

In Moscow, Putin signed his Parliament’s legislation approving the treaties making Crimea and the city of Sevastopol parts of the Russian Federation – and mocked the latest U.S. sanctions, noting that he didn’t do business with one of the targeted entities, Bank Rossiya, but “I’ll definitely open an account there on Monday.”

At the signing ceremony, Putin asserted that he had no intention of further action in Ukraine. But U.S., European Union and Ukrainian officials were uncertain they could trust his words.

Susan Rice, President Barack Obama’s national security adviser, said the situation was “obviously . . . very worrying and fragile.” The European Union, hoping to add to the U.S. sanctions announced Thursday, froze the assets and blocked the travel privileges of 12 senior Russian officials thought to be involved in Putin’s decision to annex Crimea.

The EU and Ukraine also signed a political accord Friday calling for closer ties, a measure that is to be broadened into a full agreement on future association status after Ukraine holds parliamentary elections later this spring. In another action that is likely to rile Russia, the EU offered close cooperation with two other former Soviet republics – Moldova, where Russian troops have been present in a breakaway region for more than two decades, and Georgia, parts of which Russian forces have occupied since 2008.

In Crimea itself, there was no sign of serious confrontations between the dominant Russian forces and Ukrainians. Ukraine had ordered its forces to return to the mainland earlier this week, but there was no massive movement of Ukrainian soldiers from Crimea, and it remained unclear how many of the troops might have decided to accept Russian promises of higher pay and better pension benefits to switch sides.

But Ukraine remained on edge, as Russian media stepped up its attacks on the government in Kiev and its supporters and suggested that the country was in anarchy. The Russian reports claimed that “thugs and radicals from Maidan” – a reference to the square in Kiev that was the center of protests that drove pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich from power last month – were planning to take down the current, interim government in Kiev. Similar Russian media reports preceded the invasion of Crimea.

Against that context, the base in Andreevka, 60 miles southwest of the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk, seemed an apt symbol of the bleak situation the country would face if Putin were to decide the conditions in Ukraine merited further Russian intervention.

Work on the base began a week ago, with the troops coming from Cherkassy, roughly 500 miles away in central Ukraine, Ivashenko said.

The base is close to a key rail link with Rostov, Russia, an electrified two-track line that appeared to be well maintained and in theory could be used to transport troops and equipment. But there was no sign at the base of any preparations to interdict the line.

Asked how the Ukrainian military would respond to Russian war games, Brig. Gen. Nikolai Litvin explained the troops' defensive preparations. "We are going to dig a trench along the whole border," he told a group of visiting reporters.

But the proposition hardly instilled confidence that Ukraine's government in Kiev could mount much of a defense. He said funds to build the base had come from the provincial government, not the interim government in Kiev, a sign the Kiev government is strapped for cash.

The trench itself, extending about a quarter-mile, seemed likely to offer little to slow advancing Russian troops, should they come. About 10 feet deep and as little as five or six feet wide, the gap could easily be bridged.

The real challenge for Ukraine, if Moscow decides to invade, is the topography. The rich farmland that made Ukraine the breadbasket for the former Soviet Union is flat, ideal country for tanks.

In Washington, Obama National Security Adviser Rice recalled that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu had assured Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel this week that Russian troops arrayed along the border "are there to conduct exercises only, that they had no intention of crossing the border into Ukraine, and that they would take no aggressive action."

But she seemed unconvinced. "Obviously, given their past practice and the gap between what they have said and what they have done," she said, "we are watching it with skepticism."

Ukraine's defense minister, Ihor Tenyukh, has estimated that Russia has as many as 60,000 troops just across Ukraine's eastern border – others estimated 30,000 to 40,000 – and he has asked for U.S. military assistance.

But Obama, who embarks Monday on a trip to Europe, has ruled out "getting into a military excursion in Ukraine" and said engaging Russia militarily "would not be appropriate."

The only assistance that appears to be forthcoming is non-lethal aid. "We have talked about providing ready-to-eat meals to the Ukrainian armed forces," Rear Adm. John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, told reporters Thursday. He added that medical supplies, uniforms, equipment "and that sort of thing" was envisaged.

Meanwhile, at Ukraine's new camp at Andreevka, there was a sense that a facility that could be built in one day – on a lot that had been used to store farm equipment – could also be dismantled in one day. There are no barracks, only tents, which are heated by wood stoves, with firewood stacked near the entrance of each.

Ukrainian forces based at Andreevka are supposed to oversee a 25-mile stretch of border, officers said, but the question that no officer here could answer Friday was how Ukraine plans to protect the rest of the 500-mile border.

What if war comes? The Rev. Yevgeniy, 31, an Orthodox Christian chaplain, said the Ukrainian military is not prepared for war. “The army is very weak,” he told McClatchy. “We hope it’s not going to happen here.”