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Ukraine Pulls Back Forces as Russia Tightens Grip on Crimea

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

MARCH 24, 2014

The acting president of Ukraine, Oleksandr V. Turchynov, formally ordered the withdrawal of the remaining Ukrainian military forces in Crimea on Monday, ending an increasingly futile effort by some troops to hold on to their bases after Russia's occupation and annexation of the territory.

The Ukrainian military has been virtually powerless in the face of the invasion late last month by Russian special forces and other units. In recent days, there has been a steady capitulation as Russian units seized base after base, in some cases using armored vehicles to smash through gates and firing weapons in the air.

The announcement by Mr. Turchynov, who is both acting president and the speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, came after a weekend in which the Russian forces stormed two of the last major installations in Crimea still under Ukrainian control — a base in Belbek adjacent to the Sevastopol airport on Saturday and a naval base in Feodosia, on the peninsula's eastern coast, early on Monday.

Russians Seize Crimean Base

Ukrainian troops were defiant but ultimately capitulated to Russian forces at Belbek Air Force Base in Crimea. At least one man was injured in the confrontation.

Mr. Turchynov said the decision for withdrawal and evacuation of military personnel and their families had been made by Ukraine's national security council.

“The National Security and Defense Council has adopted decisions giving instructions to the Ministry of Defense to redeploy military units that are in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea,” Mr. Turchynov said, according to a statement from the security council. He added that the government would evacuate families who he said are facing “a real threat to life and health.”

He said the government had been instructed to find housing for the displaced troops and their families as well as for “all those who are currently forced to leave homes under pressure and aggression of the occupying troops of the Russian Army.”

While some of the base seizures have been dramatic, with armored vehicles smashing through gates and walls, they have generally been carried out without injuries. In one case, at a technical and mapping installation near the Crimean capital of Simferopol, two men — a Ukrainian soldier and a member of a local pro-Russian self-defense militia — were shot and killed.

The circumstances of that incident remain murky, with the local authorities saying that the men were killed by a sniper who was a member of a right-wing nationalist group from western Ukraine.

Mr. Turchynov's announcement of a formal withdrawal was certain to speed the inevitable consolidation of Russian control over the Crimean peninsula, which President Vladimir V. Putin said was being annexed to Russia in part to correct a historical mistake. The majority of the population here identify as ethnic Russians.

In 1954, Crimea was transferred from Russian control to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, in what Mr. Putin has described as a historical glitch.

The occupation, however, was also a direct Russian response to the ouster of President Viktor F. Yanukovich, Ukraine's former pro-Russian leader, after more than three months of civil unrest in Kiev, the capital.

Street protests began after Mr. Yanukovich, under Russian pressure, rejected sweeping political and trade agreements with the European Union that he had been promising to sign for months. The protests intensified in response to police violence and other actions by the Yanukovich administration that sought to clamp down on free speech and political dissent.

Mr. Yanukovich is now believed to be living in or near Rostov-on-Don, Russia, where he has held two news conferences and claimed to still be the legitimate president of Ukraine. While the

Ukrainian Parliament did not formally impeach him, it voted to relieve him of power after he fled his residence in February.

Russia has also massed troops along the eastern border of Ukraine, raising fears in the West that Mr. Putin will order a further military advance. So far, he has declared that there are no plans for such a move attack.

The Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea has led to the worst confrontation between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War, with the United States imposing economic sanctions on Russian individuals, including some of Mr. Putin's closest personal and political allies.

It is unclear, however, if the sanctions can create enough pressure to reverse the Russian hold on Crimea, and Mr. Putin has given no indication that he intends to back off.