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<http://news.yahoo.com/russia-launches-military-drills-southwest-143356400.html>

Russia launches military drills in the southwest

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Russia's military on Thursday launched maneuvers of air defense forces in the southwest of the country, the latest in a series of frequent drills amid tensions with the West.

The Southern Military District, where the exercises will take place, includes the regions bordering Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed last year. But the military didn't say exactly where the maneuvers were being held.

The Defense Ministry said Thursday the exercises would last for more than a month and involve more than 2,000 troops and 500 weapons systems, including air defense missiles. The maneuvers would simulate fending off massive air and missile attacks.

The West accuses Russia of backing the insurgency with troops and weapons, accusations the Kremlin denies. The Defense Ministry again rejected the latest U.S. claims of a Russian troop presence in eastern Ukraine.

Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the commander of U.S. Army Europe, has said earlier this week that Russia has 12,000 troops in eastern Ukraine.

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov acerbically rejected the claim Thursday. "Why 12,000 and not 20,000 or 25,000? Why go small?" he told reporters.

Antonov argued that more than 30 flights by foreign military observers over Russian territory have failed to yield any evidence to corroborate Western accusations.