

Putin Bolsters His Forces Near Ukraine, U.S. Says: [Foreign Desk]

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WASHINGTON -- In a sign that the tense crisis in Ukraine could soon escalate, Russia has continued to deploy air defense systems in eastern Ukraine and has built up its forces near the border, American officials said on Wednesday.

Western officials are not sure if the military moves are preparations for a new Russian-backed offensive that would be intended to help the separatists seize additional territory.

Some analysts say that President Vladimir V. Putin may not want to act before the European Union reassesses in June whether to ease or keep the economic sanctions it has imposed on Russia because of its annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine. Others say it is possible that Russia is making the moves to increase the pressure on the Ukrainian government to make concessions to the separatists on political and constitutional issues.

Either way, the new military activity is a major concern because it has significantly reduced the amount of warning that Ukraine and its Western supporters would have if Russian forces and separatists mounted a joint offensive. And some of Russia's actions, American officials say, are flagrant violations of the cease-fire agreement that European nations negotiated with Russia and Ukraine in February.

"This is the highest amount of Russian air defense equipment in eastern Ukraine since August," Marie Harf, the State Department spokeswoman, said in a statement. "Combined Russian-separatist forces continue to violate the terms of the 'Minsk 2' agreement signed in mid-February."

In recent weeks, the war of words over Ukraine has intensified. Last week, Russia charged that a modest program to train Ukraine's national guard that 300 American troops are carrying out in western Ukraine could "destabilize the situation."

To respond to this and other Russian allegations, the Obama administration declassified intelligence describing a range of Russian military activities in and near Ukraine, which was included in Ms. Harf's statement.

Some of the Russian military's air defense systems in Ukraine have been moved closer to the front lines, her statement noted. The Russian military and separatists have also kept substantial communications and other "command and control" equipment in eastern Ukraine that would be needed to organize an attack.

In addition, the Russian military has been providing extensive training for separatists in eastern Ukraine. Western officials said such training might indicate that the Russian military was looking to play a less obvious role and avoid a possible expansion of sanctions should hostilities resume.

The use of Russian reconnaissance drones in the training exercises "leaves no doubt that Russia is involved in the training," Ms. Harf's statement said.

Even as it has been training the separatists, the Russian military has been engaged in a buildup near Russia's border with Ukraine.

"After maintaining a relatively steady presence along the border, Russia is sending additional units there," Ms. Harf's statement said. "These forces will give Russia its largest presence on the border since October 2014."

The State Department did not say how many Russian troops were arrayed on the border, including near the Russian city of Belgorod. But one Western official, who asked not to be identified because he was discussing intelligence reports, said Russia had moved 12 battalion tactical groups close to the border. The number of troops in such units can vary, but a battalion could have about 1,000 troops.

The cease-fire agreement that was negotiated in February in Minsk, Belarus, was supposed to ease political tensions and put an end to the bitter conflict. Germany and France negotiated that accord with Russia and Ukraine. It called for the pulling back of heavy weapons, the removal of foreign forces and the disarming of "illegal groups."

The Obama administration did not send an official to those talks, but it was in close touch with European officials when the agreement was being negotiated.

"Combined Russian-separatist forces maintain a sizable number of artillery pieces and multiple rocket launchers within areas prohibited under the Minsk accords," Ms. Harf's statement said.

"Russia has continued to ship heavy weapons into eastern Ukraine."