

# Families Of Lost Russian Troops In Ukraine Want Answers

BY LAURA MILLS  
Associated Press

MOSCOW — The last time Valeria Sokolova saw her husband, the 25-year-old paratrooper told her that he and his fellow soldiers were heading for military exercises in southern Russia, near the Ukrainian border.

"He was vague in a way that was very unusual, and it was hard for all of them to say goodbye," Sokolova told The Associated Press, recounting their conversation from earlier this month.

On Monday, 10 men from his division were captured in eastern Ukraine amid fighting between pro-Moscow separatists and Ukrainian troops. At least two others from the division were killed and an unspecified number were wounded.

Sokolova, the mother of a 6-year-old boy, does not know the fate of her husband, and she said Russian military officials have released no information about the servicemen. She fears for his safety.

Similar questions are being raised by families of other Russian servicemen about unexplained deaths and missing or captured soldiers who are said to be on military exercises. The answers could undermine public support for President Vladimir Putin and his policies in Ukraine.

The government has released little information about those killed while fighting with the rebels — a policy that some have compared to one used during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s. This secrecy may become more difficult to maintain if the death toll grows.

Sokolova, who declined to identify her husband further because she worries it could have consequences for him, said she and other army wives

converged on the local garrison to demand answers.

"Only through each other did we find out the number of killed, wounded," she told the AP by telephone from Kostroma, a city 350 kilometers (210 miles) north of Moscow.

Russian officials, including Putin, have said the captured paratroopers had gotten lost and wandered over the border by mistake.

The news added to the growing evidence that Russia — despite its denials — is sending troops and weapons to fight alongside the separatists.

On Thursday, Ukraine accused Russia of sending tanks, armored vehicles and troops onto its soil. NATO said at least 1,000 Russian troops are in Ukraine and released what it said were satellite photos of Russian artillery units moving in last week.

Rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko said up to 4,000 Russians have fought on the separatist side since the conflict began in April, including soldiers, but he said they were on leave and fighting voluntarily.

Two other cases involving the deaths of Russian troops have recently come to light.

This week, the presidential human rights commission published an open letter online demanding an investigation into the deaths this month of nine members of a motorized infantry brigade also sent to the southern Rostov region for military exercises.

The request to look into the deaths came from the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, a highly respected non-governmental organization with a long history of working to defend the rights of soldiers. Within days, however, the commission's letter appeared to have been removed from its website.

In the northwestern region of Pskov,

home of a major airborne division, the deaths of two paratroopers appear to have been suppressed. The names of the dead have been removed from fresh graves in a cemetery visited by local journalists, who were threatened or chased away by thugs. Relatives of dead or missing paratroopers reportedly have been warned not to talk to the media.

"This is the same old Soviet behavior," said Valentina Melnikova, the Moscow-based director of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers.

"It reminds me of the secret burials of soldiers during the first half of the Afghan war," she said, referring to 1979-89 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. "When they sent bodies back, they didn't give any information about where he had died and didn't allow people to write on his tombstone that he was a soldier."

Melnikova also said that in previous conflicts, such as the early stages of the war against separatists in Chechnya in the 1990s, many soldiers who were killed or captured on Chechen soil were listed on army rosters as having been on leave.

In recent days, Melnikova said she has received multiple reports from divisions where soldiers have been intimidated into signing up as contract troops and then whisked across the border.

"According to our military laws, they are supposed to be given a month's leave before their contract work starts," she said. "But they aren't given the leave; they're sent straight across the border."

Sokolova, the wife of the missing Kostroma paratrooper, was at home Tuesday when another soldier's wife called with the news that the 10 men in their husbands' division had been captured by Ukrainian troops.

## US Considers Sanctioning Against Russia

WASHINGTON (AP) — Western business connections are complicating efforts to bring economic sanctions against executives and companies closely aligned with Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle. A prime example: the Russian Direct Investment Fund, a \$10 billion sovereign wealth fund that's escaped sanctions in spite of international efforts to punish Russia for its incursions in Ukraine.

A sanctioned Russian bank funds the RDIF, and a top Putin aide serves on one of its boards. The fund's international advisory board, meanwhile, is stocked with blue-chip American and European private equity executives, among them Stephen Schwarzman of The Blackstone Group LP, Leon Black of Apollo Global Management LLC and David Bonderman of TPG Capital LP.

European investors took stakes in telecommunications firms, information technology consultants and health care companies. In total, more than \$6 billion from blue-chip foreign companies have flowed in.

President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are considering new economic sanctions against Russia over its apparent invasion of Ukraine. There is no evidence that the Russian Direct Investment Fund would be a target, but the situation with the sanctions-free RDIF illustrates the Obama administration's struggle to achieve conflicting goals — punishing Putin's circle without damaging U.S. companies doing business in Russia.

## Rescuers Locate Trapped Gold Miners

BONANZA, Nicaragua (AP) — Rescuers on Friday located 20 of at least 24 freelance gold miners trapped underground by a landslide in northern Nicaragua, but were not immediately able to bring them to safety.

Teams of dogs helped locate the 20 miners, and rescue workers were laboring to get them out, said Milagros Solorzano of the ruling Sandinista Party in the community of Bonanza.

Solorzano told local Channel 8 that the 20 miners were located in a kind of cave inside the mine and have been able to communicate with rescue workers. They said they didn't know the whereabouts of the other four.

Relatives of the trapped miners gathered Friday on the margins of the rescue operation. Friends held up Margarita Mendez, who looked like she was going to faint as she awaited news about her son, Salvador Urbina.

The slide occurred Thursday at the El Comal gold and silver mine operated by Hemco in the town of Bonanza, about 260 miles (420 kilometers) northeast of Managua.

## Jamaican Ends Legal Challenge

KINGSTON, Jamaica (AP) — A Jamaican gay rights activist who brought a legal challenge to the Caribbean island's anti-sodomy law says he has withdrawn the case after growing fearful about safety.

Last year, Javed Jaghai made headlines after initiating a constitutional court challenge to Jamaica's 1864 law that bans sex between men.

But in an affidavit, Jaghai said he has been "threatened enough times to know that I am vulnerable." He believes his "loved ones are under threat."

On Friday, Janet Burak of New York-based advocacy group AIDS-Free World said the fear that pushed Jaghai to end his challenge "is the same fear that keeps gay men in Jamaica underground."

## UN: 'Very fluid' Situation On Held Peacekeepers

BY CARA ANNA  
AND PITA LIGAIULA  
Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — The plight of dozens of U.N. peacekeepers in Syria remained "very, very fluid" Friday, the secretary-general's spokesman said, as talks aimed at their release stretched into a second day.

Some radio contact has been made with the 72 peacekeepers from the Philippines who have been restricted to their positions, Stephane Dujarric told reporters. Another 44 peacekeepers from Fiji remain detained.

On Friday evening, the U.N. said in a statement it "has received assurances from credible sources" that the Fijian peacekeepers "are safe and in good health."

The statement added that they had been informed "the intention behind holding the peacekeepers was to remove them from an active battlefield to a safe area for their own protection."

Kate Brandli, a spokeswoman for the U.N. Department Peacekeeping Operations, could not offer further clarification beyond confirming they have not been released.

The U.N. has not said exactly who is holding the peacekeepers, whose mission monitors a 1974 disengagement accord between Syria and Israel. Various Syrian rebel groups have been engaged in intense fighting with the Syrian military in and near the Golan Heights.

Dujarric said the peacekeepers were being held by "non-state armed actors" who identify as the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front.

He said talks continue "with a wide range of parties within Syria" and U.N. member states who may have influence with them. Details remained sketchy, he added.

"Those who are being held have food and water for some time," Dujarric said. "At this very point, it is not an extreme concern."

Both the Philippines and Fiji remained hopeful the impasse could be resolved without bloodshed.

Fijian Commander Brig. Gen. Mosese Tikoitoga said he's been informed his soldiers are unharmed, although he hasn't been able to contact them directly. Philippines President Benigno Aquino III said that while the situation was tense, there was no reason to believe his troops faced immediate danger.

The events began Thursday morning on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, an area divided between Israel and Syria.

Tikoitoga said three vehicles filled with about 150 armed rebels converged on the Fijian camp at about 7:30 a.m.

He said the rebels demanded the Fijian soldiers leave within 10 minutes and

insisted they board the rebel vehicles. The Fijians were then taken by the rebels to an unknown location. He said he's been told they were later transported back to their original post.

"We are all doing our best to ensure the safety of (those) that are currently being held captive," Tikoitoga said.

Brig. Gen. Domingo Tutaan with the Philippine military said the rebels surrounded two encampments about 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) apart occupied by Filipino peacekeepers and demanded that they give up their firearms, but the peacekeepers refused. "This resulted in a standoff," he said, reading from a statement.

However, "the potential for de-escalation is still positive," he said. The military leadership in the Philippines was in direct communication with the peacekeepers, he added.

Col. Roberto Ancan, com-

mander of the Philippine military's Peacekeeping Operations Center, said the soldiers were armed with assault rifles, light machine guns and pistols and had enough ammunition to defend themselves.

"We have our rules of engagement wherein we can use deadly force in defense of United Nations facilities," he said.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned the detention of the Fijians and called for their immediate release.

The U.N. mission, known as UNDOF, has 1,223 troops from six countries: Fiji, India, Ireland, Nepal, Netherlands and the Philippines.

But the Philippine government last week said it would bring home its 331 peacekeeping forces from the Golan Heights after their tour of duty ends in October, amid the deteriorating security.

Fiji said it would not be

pressured into withdrawing from its peacekeeping efforts in the Golan Heights.

"We will not shy away from that responsibility under these circumstances," Tikoitoga said.

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