

Putin Hails 'Return' Of Crimea; Fighting Kills 7

BY VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
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Associated Press

SEVASTOPOL, Crimea — Sailing into this Black Sea port Friday amid a jubilant spectacle of fighter jets and warships, President Vladimir Putin celebrated the return of Crimea to Russia as "historic justice" during a Victory Day display of military pomp and patriotism.

The gravity of the crisis gripping the rest of Ukraine was underscored by deadly clashes in the east, where fighting left bodies in the streets of the seaside city of Mariupol and the police station a smoldering ruin.

At least seven people were killed and dozens injured in the city, one of at least a dozen where pro-Russian insurgents are agitating to follow Crimea's lead in seceding from Ukraine.

Speaking before a cheering crowd of thousands on a triumphant first visit to Crimea since its annexation into Russia, Putin hailed the incorporation of its 2 million people as a "return to the Motherland" and a tribute to the "historical justice and the memory of our ancestors."

The Russian leader's visit to the Crimean port of Sevastopol, where Russia's Black Sea Fleet is based, came on Victory Day, which commemorates the defeat of Nazi Germany and is Russia's most important holiday. The trip



CLAUDIA HIMMELREICH/MCT
A woman puts money into a donation box labeled "to support our armed forces" at St. Volodymyr's Cathedral in Kiev.

was strongly criticized by the United States, NATO and Ukraine's Foreign Ministry, which said it trampled on Ukraine's sovereignty and international law.

Putin's two Victory Day celebrations — a massive show of military muscle in the annual Red Square parade in Moscow, followed by the extravagant in Sevastopol — rubbed salt in the wounds of Ukraine's interim government in Kiev without ever once mentioning its name.

In Sevastopol, Putin rode a cabin cruiser-type boat past hulking warships, issuing greetings to their crews, as warplanes and helicopters swooped over the vast harbor. He then stepped onto land for a short address to the tens of thousands on the shore who

came to watch the spectacle.

He expanded on the theme of righting a historic wrong with Crimea's return to Russia in a later address at a commemorative concert, saying Moscow respected other countries' interests and "we ask that all of them show regard for our legal interests, including the restoration of historical justice and the right to self-determination."

Conquered by Russia in the 18th century under Catherine the Great, Crimea only became part of Ukraine in 1954 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred jurisdiction from Russia. The move was a formality until the 1991 Soviet collapse meant Crimea landed in an independent Ukraine. It remained under Ukrainian control until its an-

nexation by Russia in March, following a hastily arranged referendum — moves condemned by the West and Kiev.

The violence in the strategic port of Mariupol on the Azov Sea — along the main road between the Russian border and the Crimean Peninsula — was a clear sign of increasing unrest in eastern Ukraine.

The Donetsk region, which includes Mariupol, and the neighboring Luhansk region are to hold a hastily organized referendum Sunday on declaring sovereignty, a move likely to deepen the crisis between supporters of Ukraine's fledgling government and pro-Russian insurgents who claim the authorities in Kiev are a fascist junta.

There were varying accounts of Friday's violence in the city of a half-million people that also was hit by unrest last month.

Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said about 60 gunmen attacked the Mariupol police station and were repulsed in an operation that killed one policeman and about 20 people he called "terrorists."

The Donetsk regional government said seven people were killed and 39 others were wounded.

The conflicting death tolls could not be reconciled. An Associated Press reporter saw three bodies in the street — one of them covered by a blanket with a policeman's hat placed at the head.

Homs Residents Check On Homes

HOMS, Syria (AP) — Hundreds of Syrians, some snapping photographs with their cell phones, wandered down paths carved out of rubble in the old quarters of Homs on Friday, getting their first glimpse of the horrendous destruction that two years of fighting inflicted on rebel-held parts of the city.

The scenes that greeted them were devastating: City blocks pounded into an apocalyptic vista of hollow facades of blown-out buildings. Dust everywhere. Streets strewn with rebar, shattered concrete bricks, toppled telephone poles and the occasional charred, crumpled carcasses of cars.

For more than a year, President Bashar Assad's troops blockaded these neighborhoods, pounding the rebel bastions with his artillery and air force. Under a deal struck this week, the government assumed control of the old quarters, while in return some 2,000 rebel fighters were granted safe passage to opposition areas north of Homs.

The final piece of the agreement fell into place Friday afternoon as the last 300 or so rebels left Homs after an aid convoy was allowed into two pro-government villages in northern Syria besieged by the opposition. The aid delivery was part of the Homs agreement.

The withdrawal was a major victory for the government in a conflict that has killed more than 150,000 people since March 2011. The deal handed Assad control of the city once known as "the capital of the revolution," as well as a geographic linchpin in central Syria from which to launch offensives on rebel-held territory in the north.

British, US Experts Join Search For Girls

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — The international effort to rescue the 276 schoolgirls being held captive by Islamic extremists in northeastern Nigeria was boosted Friday when British security experts joined the Nigerian and American forces trying to rescue the missing students.

As the worldwide effort got underway the weakness of the Nigerian military was exposed in a report issued by Amnesty International.

Britain said its aim was not only to help with the current crisis but to defeat Boko Haram.

"The team will be considering not just the recent incidents but also longer-term counter-terrorism solutions to prevent such attacks in the future and defeat Boko Haram," the Foreign & Commonwealth Office said in a statement Friday.

The American team was joined by six additional military officers and more are expected soon, said Pentagon spokesman Navy Rear Adm. John Kirby. The U.S. officers will do a "gap analysis," an assessment to identify what the Nigerian military needs that the U.S. could provide in the search for the girls, he said.

GOP Names Team For New House Probe

WASHINGTON (AP) — Despite Democratic complaints, Republicans jumped into a new election-season investigation of the deadly Benghazi assault on Friday, naming majority members of a special House committee. Democrats mulled a boycott of the panel, which is inspiring bitter partisanship before even starting its work.

House Speaker John Boehner immediately took to social media to highlight his seven-member Republican team. Democrats have five seats to fill, if they decide to participate at all in what Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi derided as a "political stunt."

"For whatever reason, everything seems to be partisan," acknowledged Rep. Trey Gowdy, a second-term Republican and former prosecutor from South Carolina whom Boehner picked last week to head the committee. Gowdy expressed his hope that a fair Benghazi investigation would transcend politics, but he also suggested Democrats would have to accept that "one side gets more strikes than the other side when you're reconstituting a jury."

The Republicans' roster includes veterans of previous House examinations of the Sept. 11, 2012, attack that killed a U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.

Arkansas Judge Strikes Down Gay Marriage Ban

BY ANDREW DEMILLO
Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — A judge on Friday struck down Arkansas' ban on same-sex marriage, saying the state has "no rational reason" for preventing gay couples from marrying.

Pulaski County Circuit Judge Chris Piazza ruled that the 2004 voter-approved amendment to the state constitution violates the rights of same-sex couples. He didn't put his ruling on hold as some judges have done in other states, opening the door for same-sex couples in Arkansas to begin seeking marriage licenses, though it wasn't clear whether that would happen before Monday.

"This is an unconstitutional attempt to narrow the definition of equality," Piazza wrote. "The exclusion of a minority for no rational reason is a dangerous precedent."

Piazza issued his ruling late Friday, about half an hour after the marriage license office in Pulaski County closed.

Arkansas courthouses typically aren't open on weekends, but with the state in its early-voting period for a May 20 primary, several clerks' offices will be open Saturday. How-

ever, clerks reached by The Associated Press after Piazza issued his ruling said they hadn't been formally notified of it and weren't prepared to begin issuing marriage licenses.

At least one couple who sued over the ban said they hoped to wed quickly. Kathy Henson said she and her girlfriend Angela Buford planned to seek a marriage license in neighboring Saline County as soon as offices opened.

"We think that (Piazza) did a really great job and that he ruled on the right side of history," Henson said.

State Attorney General Dustin McDaniel's office said he would appeal the ruling, which came a week after McDaniel announced he personally supports gay marriage rights but would continue to defend the constitutional ban in court.

"We respect the Court's decision, but, in keeping with the Attorney General's obligation to defend the state constitution, we will appeal," spokesman Aaron Sadler said.

"We will request that Judge Piazza issue a stay of his ruling so as not to create confusion or uncertainty about the law while the Supreme Court considers the matter."

The amendment was passed in 2004 with the overwhelming support of Arkansas voters. Piazza's ruling also overturns a 1997 state law banning gay marriage.

In his decision, Piazza cited the U.S. Supreme Court's 1967 decision that invalidated laws on interracial marriage.

"It has been over 40 years since Mildred Loving was given the right to marry the person of her choice," Piazza wrote, referring to that ruling. "The hatred and fears have long since vanished and she and her husband lived full lives together; so it will be for the same-sex couples. It is time to let that beacon of freedom shine brighter on all our brothers and sisters. We will be stronger for it."

The U.S. Supreme Court last year ruled that a law forbidding the federal government from recognizing

same-sex marriages was unconstitutional. Since then, lower-court judges have repeatedly cited the decision when striking down some of the same-sex marriage bans that were enacted after Massachusetts started recognizing gay marriages in 2004.

Federal judges have ruled against marriage bans in Michigan, Oklahoma, Utah, Virginia and Texas, and ordered Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee to recognize same-sex marriages from other states.

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