《普京确认已撤回乌克兰边境军队》

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MOSCOW, May 7 (Xinhua) -- Russia had withdrawn its troops from the Ukrainian border, said Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting with President of the Swiss Confederation Didier Burkhalter in Moscow, the Russian capital, Wednesday.

"We pulled them back. They no longer stay on the Ukrainian border but are in their bases and at training ranges," Putin said in meeting with Burkhalter, who is also chairperson-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Putin didn't specify whether those locations were in areas near Ukraine.

While blaming the Kiev authorities for the escalating crisis in Ukraine, Putin urged them to stop "punitive operations" in that country's south and east immediately.

Tensions in eastern Ukraine have been escalating since mid- April following an armed confrontation between Ukrainian security forces and pro-Moscow activists, who demand a referendum on autonomy and closer ties with Russia.

Clashes erupted between pro- and anti-government protesters in Odessa, a Ukrainian seaport on the Black Sea, Friday, leading to killings of at least 43 people and more than 170 injuries.

Kiev has repeatedly blamed Moscow for inciting the unrest and splitting Ukraine. Russia denies the charges.

Putin called on representatives of Ukraine's southeastern regions to postpone the referendum on autonomy scheduled for Sunday May 11, in a bid "to create necessary conditions for dialogue" with Kiev.

The Russian president said he supported a proposal made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to hold a "direct, equal and full- fledged" roundtable dialogue between Kiev and troubled southeastern regions.

The end of violence exercised by armed forces and illegal armed groups of radicals was a pre-condition for such a dialogue, Putin noted.

He also described the Ukrainian presidential elections slated for May 25 as "a step in the right direction," but warned they alone will not solve the problems unless all citizens of that country feel their rights secured.

OSCE would set up a fund to finance the implementation of a proposed disarmament plan in Ukraine, said

Burkhalter, adding the bloc would send up to 1,000 observers to the Ukrainian presidential polls.

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