

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION



INFORMATION AND PRESS DEPARTMENT

32/34 Smolenskaya-Sennaya pl., 119200, Moscow G-200; tel.: (495) 244 4119, fax: 244 4112
e-mail: dip@mid.ru, web-address: www.mid.ru

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Replies by State Secretary, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Grigory Karasin to Questions from Interfax News Agency Regarding Upcoming Second Session of Russian-Ukrainian Interstate Commission's Subcommittee on Functioning and Stationing of Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet within Territory of Ukraine

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The Russian-Ukrainian Subcommittee on the Functioning and Stationing of the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet within the Territory of Ukraine will convene in Moscow on May 4. State Secretary, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Grigory Karasin heads the Russian delegation, and First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Volodymyr Ogryzko the Ukrainian. Interfax asked the Russian diplomat to give an interview in relation to the upcoming session.

Question: On the eve of the first session of the Subcommittee, which took place in Kyiv on February 14, 2006, passions raged in the press and political circles around the stationing of the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine. Now it is all relatively calm. The reason? All the questions have been solved?

Answer: But of course, the practical questions are still there. A different thing was achieved, though - an understanding of the fact that everything can and should be discussed in a calm, businesslike vein, respecting each other. Especially as it is about a sensitive theme - the status of the Black Sea Fleet on Ukrainian territory. Undoubtedly, the very start of the negotiation process on this theme within the framework of the Subcommittee, which is part of a presidential structure, the interstate commission headed by Vladimir Putin and Viktor Yushchenko, has played its role in this regard.

The Russian side has from the outset stood for the depoliticization of the problems involving the Black Sea Fleet. We want to hope that this is not a temporary "lull," but a tendency which is going to gather momentum. Not only will the fleet benefit from this, but also Russian-Ukrainian relations. In such circumstances it is easier to search for compromises on other questions too.

As to the results of the talks, it was important, as they had been resumed after a nearly three-year interval, to carry out a kind of inventory: review the agenda and compare positions on the questions figuring in it.

That was the aim of the first session of the Subcommittee and the five specialized working

groups which were created and quite efficiently held their meetings in March-April.

Now the outcomes of the discussions in the working groups will be analyzed in Moscow, along with determining further thrusts in the negotiation process.

Question: Surely the Russian delegation has drawn conclusions for itself from the work done. With what position is Russia coming to the talks?

Answer: One of the main conclusions is that the basic agreements signed in 1997 on the terms of the stationing of the Russian fleet in Ukraine have stood the test of time and remain the foundation. Of an overhaul of such of their provisions as the lease duration and rent size there can be no talk whatsoever. That could lead to a dangerous revision of the set of questions in which neither side is interested.

The subject of talks is questions which either were not conclusively settled in the past or arose in connection with changes in the legislation of Ukraine and the new political realities. Admittedly, those are quite many questions. They differ in themes (property and financial, military and political, navigational and hydrographic, legal, environmental and others) and in caliber. The solution of these questions can make the conditions of the activity of the fleet more stable, and the life of the servicemen and members of their families more comfortable. The fleet would also fulfill better the role of a natural connecting link in relations between Russia and Ukraine.

The work done has shown that on a whole array of such questions "points of contact" have emerged. At the same time several themes have become apparent, for example, the mechanism for replacement of the fleet's armaments, navigational support in the Black and Azov Seas, and the jurisdiction of law enforcement agencies in the places of deployment of fleet units, on which the sides' positions differ quite strongly. Obviously it is these themes that will turn out to be in the center of the negotiation process in the period ahead.

Question: Will the positions of the Black Sea Fleet be undermined if no agreements on these themes can be reached?

Answer: Why take a pessimistic view of things? The basic agreements currently in effect create sufficiently firm conditions for the performance by the Black Sea Fleet of the tasks set for it in the present circumstances as well. And these tasks the fleet is performing successfully.

So there are no grounds to make gloomy forecasts. The resources of the negotiation process are far from being exhausted. The basic agreements provide for a variety of mechanisms to settle disputes, and all these mechanisms must be activated.

Russia is not acting in the talks as a petitioner. In 1997 Ukraine not only gave consent to the stationing of the Black Sea Fleet within its territory, but also committed itself to provide normal conditions for its functioning. This also applies to the issues on which the differences so far remain. Russia does not expect from Ukraine anything that would go beyond the bounds of these commitments, but does count on their being implemented in full.

May 3, 2006