

Beat: Business

UN envoy leaves Crimea after being held up by armed men

-, 06.03.2014, 03:46 Time

USPA News - United Nations (UN) Senior Advisor Robert Serry was threatened by unidentified men on Wednesday while visiting the Ukrainian region of Crimea, forcing him to flee his car and take refuge in a coffee shop that was surrounded by an angry pro-Russian crowd. Serry arrived in Crimea on Tuesday to assess the situation on the ground after Russian forces took control of the autonomous republic.

He was concluding a visit to the naval headquarters of Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, on late Wednesday afternoon when he was approached by a group of armed men that threatened him. "When I left, my car was blocked and somebody, who did not identify himself, was telling me that he had orders to bring me immediately to the airport," Serry told ITV News. "I refused. I sat in the car. There was kind of a standoff. At some point these people actually took the driver out, put another driver in. [They] tried to put other people in the car. I managed to get outside the car and I walked and I found this cafe." Serry remained stuck in the coffee shop for about an hour as an angry pro-Russian crowd gathered outside, some of them armed and wearing military fatigue. The UN envoy, accompanied by assistant Ruth Sigalus, asked an ITV reporter and his camera crew to stay with them, hoping their presence would keep them safe. "Please start filming. Start filming now, please. ... No, no, no. Don't leave, please," Sigalus said as the ITV crew began filming inside the coffee shop, capturing the tense situation. Serry could be seen calling for help, saying at one point: "Please come as soon as possible now, because I'm afraid that otherwise we..." The situation immediately made headlines when Ukraine's foreign ministry said Serry had been kidnapped and taken hostage by unidentified men. But UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson quickly denied those reports, saying Serry had not been kidnapped and was "in good shape physically." After nearly an hour, Serry agreed to the group's demands to go straight to the airport and end his mission, after which Ukrainian police forced a way through the angry crowd to allow the UN official to leave the coffee shop. He then entered a waiting car as the angry crowd shouted "Russia! Russia" and other pro-Russian phrases. Soon after, Serry arrived at Simferopol International Airport where he later took a flight to return to the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. "[He] will shortly return to Kiev to continue his mission, which was cut short by today's incident," the UN said in a brief e-mailed note to correspondents. At an earlier press briefing while Serry was still held up in the coffee shop, Eliasson admitted there were no security arrangements in place for the trip to Crimea. "Unfortunately, we have had to relocate staff from Crimea during the last few days and we did not have the security detail necessary," he said. "We were relying on the Ukrainian authorities' security and they were aware of the trip and there is a representative of the Ukrainian authorities in Simferopol. But I don't know to what extent they could supply sufficient security." Eliasson added: "You have to understand that, under these dramatic circumstances, Robert Serry found it very important to go to Crimea in this very tense situation. And he was also, by the way, accompanied by the OSCE representative, Mr. [Tim] Guldemann who is the Special Envoy from the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe. He was also with him, but not at the special meeting at the Naval Headquarters."

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1967/un-envoy-leaves-crimea-after-being-held-up-by-armed-men.html>

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619