

Poroshenko asks Metropolitan Onufry to help have Ukrainian naval sailors freed



Kiev, December 10, Interfax – Ukrainian President Pyotr Poroshenko will undertake every necessary measure to have Ukrainian naval sailors detained in the Kerch Strait released from custody, the press service of the presidential executive office said.

Poroshenko said that to that end he addressed the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. “Yesterday and a day before yesterday I talked to head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate His Beatitude Onufry. I asked him to immediately contact Moscow so that the church will take relevant measures to return [naval sailors]. I will use any opportunity to return our soldiers. We will pray and hope that this will take place as soon as possible,” the Ukrainian president said.

He said that he had also contacted a number of foreign leaders and thoroughly informed them of the current situation. He in particular had talks with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Ukraine will never recognize a judgment of any Russian court, as it finds detained naval sailors as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention, the head of state said.

“They should be immediately freed. Otherwise, Russia will be held accountable,” he said.

Russian border guards used weapons to stop three Ukrainian naval vessels in the Kerch Strait area on November 25. The vessels in question – the tug Yany Kapu and the armored gunboats Berdiansk and Nikopol – were on their way from Odessa through the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov to Mariupol. The Ukrainian vessels were escorted to Kerch.

The courts of Simferopol and Kerch ruled to arrest 24 Ukrainians, who were onboard those naval ships, until January 25, 2019. These judgments have already been appealed with the Crimean Supreme Court, but the date of hearing these appeals has not been set yet.

Ukrainian naval sailors are charged with a crime enshrined in Part 3 Article 322 of the Russian Criminal Code (illegal crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation committed by a group as part of preliminary collusion or by an organized group with the use of violence or a threat to use it). The penalty on this charge is up to six years in prison.

The arrested naval sailors were convoyed to the remand center Lefortovo in Moscow as of November 29. At the same time, three injured sailors are being held at a medical facility of the remand center Matrosskaya Tishina. They are Ukrainian Security Service employee Vasily Soroka, and crewmembers Andrey Artemenko and Andrey Eider.

Along with the three injured, 21 Ukrainian naval sailors were arrested.