
RUSSIA INSISTS UKRAINIAN PILOT MUST SERVE SENTENCE, NO PRISONER SWAP

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Russia says Ukrainian helicopter pilot, Nadiya Savchenko, must serve her 22-year jail sentence over complicity in the death of two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine two years ago.

"With Savchenko, the situation is as simple and understandable as possible. Savchenko is a convict... She will serve her sentence," Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said in a televised interview set to be aired later Saturday from which excerpts have been published on TVTs channel's website.

On March 22, a court in Russia found Savchenko guilty of involvement in the fatal 2014 shelling of an area in eastern Ukraine that killed two Russian journalists and several civilians. She denies the charges.

Peskov also said no decision had been taken on Savchenkos release or exchange.

The news comes as Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko offered to swap Savchenko, who has repeatedly gone on hunger strike, for two Russian soldiers who are detained and on trial for their alleged involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

"Only the head of state can take any other decision. As yet there is no such decision," Peskov said.

He also slammed the "Russophobic hysteria" in the West over the Ukrainian pilots case, saying it makes resolving such problems much more difficult.

Meanwhile, Peskov confirmed that US Secretary of State John Kerry and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier raised the pilots case during their visits to Russia this week, but stressed

that "Kerry did not come to put pressure on [President Vladimir] Putin over Savchenko."

Savchenko's sentence will enter into force on April 3 as her lawyer noted that his defendant had no plan to appeal the "illegal verdict."

Moscow-Kiev ties have been in tatters since the Crimean Peninsula rejoined Russia in a referendum in March 2014 and Kiev commenced a military crackdown on pro-Russia forces fighting for greater autonomy in the Russian-speaking Luhansk and Donetsk regions in the east of the country.

According to the United Nations, over 9,000 people have lost their lives and some 20,000 have been injured in the conflict since April 2014.

Kaynak/Source: