

One Dead in Crackdown On Chernobyl Veterans

November 28, 2011



Liquidators in Donetsk on Monday. The line reads "I'm on hunger strike." **Valeriy Bilokryl**

DONETSK, Ukraine — One of about 30 protesters who had been on hunger strike in this eastern Ukrainian city over pension cuts died after police broke up their tent encampment, emergency services and the protest's leader said.

The group consisted of survivors of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and had been staging the protest in the mining city of Donetsk since Nov. 14 after reductions in the state pensions they receive for their part in fighting the 1986 disaster.

With temperatures hovering around freezing, emergencies ministry workers had provided one large tent with heating for the core protesters to sleep in until the issue had been resolved.

But after a court ruled the protest illegal late last week, police stormed into the main tent on Sunday night and removed a power generator, a stove and cut off lighting, the protest leader Nikolai Goncharov told reporters.

In the ensuing disorder, 70-year-old Gennady Konoplyov became sick and died in an ambulance after the police operation, Goncharov said.

"The police attack on the tent city was an act of terrorism," Goncharov said.

The local emergency services said Monday in a statement that the main tent had been taken down swiftly, and it was shortly after the police operation had ended that they had been called to give help to Konoplyov.

Konoplyov had earlier complained to local medical workers of pains in his chest but had refused their advice to receive hospital treatment for heart trouble, the statement said.

Emergency services said protesters had initially hindered the movement of the ambulance carrying Konoplyov on Sunday night. He died on his way to a hospital, the statement said.

The incident is a personal embarrassment for President Viktor Yanukovich. Donetsk is his hometown and normally a loyal bastion of support for him and his Party of the Regions.

"All this has happened with the silent agreement of the guarantor of the constitution, President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine. The death of our comrade will be on his conscience because the president arranged this mayhem," Goncharov said.

Reform of Ukraine's bloated pension system is one of the commitments that Yanukovich's government has had to make to the International Monetary Fund in return for a \$15 billion stand-by program.

It is dragging its heels, however, on another promise to the IMF to raise the price of household gas that it fears will dent the popularity of the Party of the Regions before a parliamentary election next October.

The Chernobyl disaster fighters, who were evacuated with their families from the northern region 25 years ago, have become a powerful action group against the government's austerity moves and regularly stage protests at the parliament building in the capital, Kiev.

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