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Russian troops begin deployment in Bosnia

By Bill Gertz
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TUZLA, Bosnia-Herzegovina — The first contingent of Russian airborne troops arrived yesterday to take part in the international peacekeeping operation under a unique, non-NATO command arrangement.

"We're extremely happy they're here," said Col. Michael Perini, a U.S. Army spokesman. "And we look forward to working with them."

The first troops were greeted by Army Maj. Gen. William Nash during an arrival ceremony along the Tuzla airstrip. Press coverage was limited to photographs, coming on the eve of a visit here by President Clinton.

Security at this base and at the U.S. staging area in Tazsar, Hungary, was extremely tight yesterday

in anticipation of the expected visit of the president tomorrow. A large number of Secret Service agents, Army CID security officers and military police have moved in to set up security perimeters.

The president is expected to wear a leather, military-style bomber jacket for his arrival here and plans to bring 100 cases of Coca-Cola, 5,000 Hershey's chocolate bars and 75 bags of mail for the troops, a U.S. official said.

Mr. Clinton's visit has been shrouded in secrecy as a security measure, but officials said he is expected to speak with soldiers at several locations here and at the staging area in southern Hungary.

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Gen. Nash, who is in charge of the American sector of the NATO peace Implementation Force, or Ifor, greeted the Russian brigade commander, Col. Aleksandr Lentsov, and Maj. Gen. Nikolai Staskov, deputy commander of the Russian airborne forces, at the airstrip.

Gen. Staskov said, "For the sake of peace in this region, I hope we will work hand in glove," Reuters news agency reported.

About 130 Russian troops were slated to arrive at the base yesterday and will remain here until later in the month.

By the end of the month, about 1,500 Russian troops will join the peacekeeping operation. The soldiers are traveling by train through Russia and Ukraine to Belgrade, Yugoslavia, said Norwegian Lt. Col. Brynjar Nymo, a NATO spokesman.

The Russians are expected to bring artillery and light tanks as part of the three-battalion brigade, he said.

As for the command arrangement, Col. Perini said the Russians will be "under the tactical coordination of General Nash."

"National command is going to remain in Russia," Col. Perini said. "We will not be assigning missions and tasks to them."

Because Moscow still regards NATO as a threat, U.S. and Russian officials worked out a command arrangement months ago for the Russian peacekeepers that will allow a Russian three-star general based at NATO headquarters to take orders directly from U.S. Gen. George Joulwan, the NATO commander.

The orders will then be relayed to Col. Lentsov so as to avoid the appearance of placing the Rus-

sians under NATO command.

What is not clear in the command arrangement is whether the Russians will be able to take unilateral actions outside of the other components of the NATO force.

A military official said that Gen. Joulwan would in theory be able to overrule orders sent to the force by the Russian general at NATO headquarters.

Col. Perini said the unique command arrangement is not expected to cause problems. "Our meetings so far have been very cordial and very positive," he said of the talks between U.S. and Russian commanders.

The elements of Task Force Eagle that are under the operational control of Gen. Nash include all U.S. forces, a Turkish brigade, and a Nordic battalion made up of troops from Sweden and Denmark.

Once it is at full strength, the Nordic unit will also include troops from Norway, Finland, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

"Operational control provides authority to assign missions and tasks," Col. Perini said. "It does not include administrative or logistical control, which is maintained at the national level."

By contrast, the "tactical control" exercised over the Russian forces will involve "detailed direction of movements and maneuvers necessary to accomplish the mission," Col. Perini said.

"It encompasses essential coordination at the tactical level," he said. "General Joulwan will exercise operational control."

A Pakistani battalion left over from the U.N. operation is still in the region but will be moving out next week, Col. Perini said. The Pakistani troops will be under the operational control of Gen. Nash until they are out of the U.S. sector in Bosnia, he said.