

A troubling time for Ukrainian basketball coach Mike Fratello: NBA Insider

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Former Cavaliers coach Mike Fratello is coaching the Ukraine national team. (AP)

By [Mary Schmitt Boyer, The Plain Dealer](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- [Mike Fratello](#) always returns a phone call.

The former Cavaliers coach and popular broadcaster, who still lives in Northeast Ohio, is one of the most-connected people in the NBA. So to not hear back from him for more than a week was unusual.

Turns out he was in Ukraine -- on a business trip. He has been the coach of the Ukrainian national basketball team since 2011, having accepted an offer from the head of the Ukrainian federation, Alexander Volkov, who played for Fratello in Atlanta.

Fratello's trip actually started in Spain, where he watched the draw for the groupings for the world championships this summer. Ukraine qualified through the European championships and wound up in the same group as the United States, one of the tournament favorites, along with host Spain.

"We will have to be very, very prepared," Fratello said after the draw. "It's a new experience for our country. It's a great honor."

From Spain, Fratello went on to Ukraine, although his visit in early February came before the violent protests escalated last week, when more than 100 people were killed in clashes in Kiev, according to The Associated Press. The AP reported that protesters advanced on police lines last week, prompting government snipers to open fire. A settlement reportedly was reached Friday, but no one is sure it will hold.

According to Fratello, when he was there, the violence was centered in a concentrated area near Independence Square in downtown. Opponents of President Viktor Yanukovich are upset over corruption and the economy and want him to step down. He reportedly fled the country Saturday insisting he will not resign in spite of the fact that parliament voted to dismiss him.

"They were in an area of about three blocks," Fratello said of the protesters, "and it was ringed with old tires that they set on fire. The smoke was awful. They poured black ink over the heads of their opponents. The traffic and the congestion in that area was terrible. We had to change hotels."

But the coach said he wasn't afraid and that he was able to move about other parts of the city freely. That wasn't the case last week as violence spread and things became much more dangerous.

"Obviously, it has escalated in the last five days," said Fratello, who briefly interrupted a telephone interview on Friday in order to listen to a television news update on the situation. "Things have gotten much worse. They closed the basketball federation offices last week. I think that was the smart thing to do. A bullet doesn't know where it's going when it leaves the gun."

Fratello has been talking to his associates in Ukraine every day. His players are scattered around the country, playing in various pro leagues. At this point, he has no plans to return until July, when the national team will hold its training camp in Yuzhne, a city located about an hour from Odessa.

But his thoughts remain with his friends and colleagues struggling through the unrest in Kiev. "I just hope and pray they reach a settlement by then," he said.