War and social attacks spread throughout Ukraine

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The Ukrainian army has expanded its offensive against the rebel controlled cities of Luhansk and Donetsk, fighting house-to-house battles with rebel groups. While the casualty figures for the civilian population and on both sides increase, the government is claiming important territorial gains.

Ukrainian security council spokesman Andrei Lyssenko stated on Wednesday that the armed forces controlled large parts of the rebel stronghold of Luhansk. There has yet to be any independent confirmation of this report. The *New York Times* cited a human rights observer in Luhansk who had not seen any Ukrainian troops so far.

The pro-Russian separatists appear still able to launch counter-attacks. On Wednesday, they announced that they had shot down a fighter plane and two military helicopters over Luhansk. They also destroyed several armoured tanks. Lyssenko has only confirmed the shooting down of the plane thus far.

In its attempts to take the city, the army is proceeding with extreme brutality. Residential districts have repeatedly come under fire. The authorities in Donetsk stated on Wednesday that since the beginning of hostilities in March, 951 civilians had been killed in the Donbas region. According to them, 1,748 people had been injured. On Wednesday alone, 52 civilians and Ukrainian soldiers and an unknown number of rebels were killed.

According to the city council in Luhansk, conditions for ordinary people remain catastrophic. The city's residents have been living without electricity and water for more than 16 days. Landline and mobile telephones are not working, and the provision of foodstuffs is rudimentary.

There have also been large-scale assaults on the civilian population in Donetsk. The city centre was targeted, among other areas. The Reuters news agency spoke with residents. "The Ukrainian army or whoever they are, are bombing us again," said Nina, 52, whose apartment was destroyed. "I've lived in this apartment building my entire life and now they want to take everything I have."

Another Donetsk resident told Reuters how her workplace was fired upon. "I hid behind the counter and closed my eyes. When I opened them again everything was dark, full of dust and smoke," she said. "How can we live like this being bombed by the leaders of our own country?"

A Russian aid convoy, which is loaded with essential supplies for the population of Luhansk, continues to be held up at the Russian-Ukrainian border. Only a few of the almost 300 vehicles have crossed the Russian border so far. It is not clear if they have passed the Ukrainian checkpoint yet. A spokesman for the separatists stated on Wednesday that the militia had evidence of planned acts of sabotage on the aid convoy.

The Kiev government's aggression is directed not only against the separatist fighters, but against the country's entire population. On Thursday, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko signed a law according to which people in the east of Ukraine could be taken into preventative custody for 30 days without judicial oversight. The government is still trying to ban the Communist Party, which is critical of the war against the separatists.

The intensification of the war against the separatists and the attacks on democratic rights are closely connected with the Kiev regime's brutal austerity measures, which are to be continued without let-up. On Thursday, Economy Minister Pavlo Sheremeta announced his resignation. Prime Minister Arseniy Yatzenyuk had sharply criticised the minister the

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previous day. “I am not satisfied with the speed and extent of reforms,” said the prime minister.

The Ukrainian government is currently seeking to obtain assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) earlier than planned. Finance Minister Alexander Shlapak requested on Wednesday that the third and fourth tranches of a $17 billion bailout programme be combined so that more than $2 billion would be paid this year. The release of the tranches is dependent upon Kiev sticking to the cuts agreed on with the IMF. The second tranche of $1.4 billion will only be decided upon at the end of August.

The IMF’s demands include an increase in gas prices, which will hit the impoverished population particularly hard. In addition, Ukraine is also to stop propping up the exchange rate of the country’s currency, hryvnya. A halt to intervening on the currency markets would likely result in a major rise in inflation.

Ukraine’s economy is already in free fall, due to the previous social attacks and the war in the east. The pro-Western *Ukrainskaya Pravda* reported that Ukraine’s industrial production in the first six months of the year had fallen by 12 percent in comparison to 2013. According to the government, the agricultural harvest will be down this year by around 15 percent.

According to experts, the Luhansk and Donetsk regions produce some 16 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Significant sectors of industry and infrastructure have already been destroyed by the army’s assault. Most of the region’s firms have halted production in the face of the war.

The situation in the energy sector is particularly critical. Ukraine obtains 50 percent of its gas from Russia. Russian state company Gazprom is no longer supplying, because Ukraine is $5 billion in debt to the company and abandoned price negotiations in February following the coup. In Kiev and other major cities, the central provision of warm water has already been stopped to consolidate gas reserves for the winter.

The Hryvnya has declined against the dollar by 70 percent this year. Economic analyst Gabriel Sterne from Oxford Economics predicts that by 2018 state debt will rise to 87 percent of GDP, which would probably lead to a debt write-down and Ukraine being cut off from the capital markets. State debt stood at just 40 percent of GDP at the start of the year.

Faced with this deep crisis, Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin appealed to the US and European Union (EU) to establish a Marshall Plan for Ukraine and to provide the country with financial assistance. He also called for military support in the struggle against the separatists. “I think it would certainly be logical to provide Ukraine with technological and military support to combat terrorism, like what is currently taking place in the case of Iraq,” Klimkin told the *Kölner Express* .

German chancellor Angela Merkel will travel to Kiev on Saturday to meet with Poroshenko and government representatives. A meeting between the Ukrainian president and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, is planned for Tuesday. The pair will meet at a gathering with representatives of the Eurasian customs union and the EU commission.

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