

Ukraine opens offensive against pro-Russian separatists in the east

Niles Williamson
20 January 2015

The Ukrainian regime opened a renewed offensive against pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbass region over the weekend in an effort to solidify control over the Donetsk International Airport, which has been the site of months of intense fighting between government forces and pro-Russian separatists.

At a rally in Kiev on Sunday, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko delivered a speech in which he declared that the government “will not give away one scrap of Ukrainian land.” The same day his government authorized the military “to unleash a massive assault” on rebel positions, according to presidential adviser Yuriy Biryukov.

Prior to the opening of this weekend’s offensive, the Secretary of the Ukrainian National Defense Council, Oleksandr Turchynov, warned in speech delivered to the Verkhovna Rada that the situation in the country could develop into a full-scale war involving all of Europe.

He laid out two possible scenarios for the conflict, one in which “the enemy turning to full-scale military actions and advancing with the active participation of Russian armed forces.” This, Turchynov said, would lead to a “full-scale continental war.”

In the second scenario he warned of the “activation of terrorist activity, and turning the confrontation into a longstanding military conflict [aimed at] exhausting economic, military, moral and psychological potential of Ukraine to create the grounds to realize their goal – to destroy Ukraine’s nationhood and independence.”

Ukrainian authorities claimed on Monday that the operation in Donetsk had succeeded in reclaiming nearly all of the territory in and around the strategically important airfield.

Despite these reported gains by government forces, fighting continued through Monday. Presidential

adviser Biryukov stated that the separatists had blown up a portion of the airport terminal, injuring a number of Ukrainian troops. Ukrainian military spokesman Yuriy Lysenko reported that 66 soldiers had been wounded and three killed since Sunday.

Separatist leaders denied that Kiev-backed forces have succeeded in retaking the airport. Alexander Zakharchenko, prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), told reporters on Monday, “All attempts of the Ukrainian army to take the airport and to get revenge for the defeat of the last year...have failed.”

The Ukrainian regime launched the attack after members of a pro-Russia Donetsk People’s Republic militia seized control of a portion of the airport on Friday. Despite these gains, members of the Ukrainian Army were reportedly still entrenched in key positions of the airport’s terminal with underground communication tunnels used as a means of resupplying these forces.

Photos and video released by the BBC showed that months of fighting have left the airport in ruins. The grounds surrounding the airport have been pockmarked by unrelenting mortar fire, the main terminal has been completely wrecked and is reportedly riddled with booby traps, while the air traffic control tower has been reduced to rubble. The Putilovsky Bridge, which connected the airport and the city, was destroyed by heavy shelling.

The Donetsk airport is a strategic foothold in the ongoing fighting between the Kiev regime and separatist forces. The regime in Kiev and the leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic both fear that the airport could be used to fly in supplies and reinforcements if either side is able to solidify control. The airstrip is reportedly still in good enough condition

to support military supply flights.

At the end of last week, the DPR's Zakharchenko had outlined plans for an offensive to recapture territory lost as a result of the government's offensive last year. "They are on territory which they do not control and will never be under their control," Zakharchenko stated in remarks posted online. "We will go further, to Slovyansk, to Kramatorsk, and so on," he said, referring to cities the separatists had lost control of in July.

There were also reports over the weekend of the most intense shelling since the peak of hostilities last summer in areas around the separatist-held city of Donetsk. Students throughout the area were told to stay home from classes on Monday to avoid being caught in the fighting.

On Monday, Zakharchenko told the press that Kiev had broken the Minsk ceasefire agreement and added, "At no point over the course of this conflict have we had to withstand such massive heavy artillery strikes the likes of which Donetsk and the surrounding regions, as well as Gorlovka, have survived over the past 24 hours."

Ukrainian military forces shelled Donetsk with mortars and Grad rockets, damaging residential buildings, a bus station and a shop, and killing at least five civilians over the weekend. On Monday a mortar shell hit Donetsk's Central Clinical Hospital No. 3, blowing out the windows. While there were no reported casualties, all of the patients had to be evacuated to other hospitals.

Eduard Basurin, a senior separatist commander, told *Sputnik News* that air strikes by Ukrainian fighter jets on Horlivka killed more than 30 civilians, including children, on Sunday. This seemingly marked the first time since last summer that the Kiev regime had deployed fighter jets in the east. The town of Makiivka canceled all public gatherings as it was also subjected to shelling and attacks by the Ukrainian air force.

Ukrainian officials claimed that at least 10 civilians had been wounded and three killed by separatist shelling in the government-controlled city of Debaltsevo, 70 kilometers northeast of Donetsk.

The ceasefire deal signed in Minsk, Belarus in November, while still formally in place, has been repeatedly breached leading to numerous casualties on both sides in the last several months.

Officially, more than 4,800 people have been killed since the beginning of the Kiev regime's assault on pro-Russian separatists opposed to the US- and EU-supported fascist-backed coup which ousted democratically elected President Victor Yanukovich in February last year. The UN estimates that more than a million people have so far been displaced by the conflict.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact