US announces plans to deploy military advisers to Ukraine

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23 January 2015

The head of the United States Army Europe, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, announced on Wednesday that a contingent of US soldiers will be dispatched to Ukraine in the spring to undertake the training of four companies of the National Guard of Ukraine (NGU). The exact number of American soldiers who will be stationed at the Yavoriv Training Area outside the western city of Lvov has yet to be determined.

The highly provocative move, which follows the positioning of US and NATO forces in Poland and the Baltic states and escalating threats of a military confrontation with Russia, came as the Kiev government steps up its war against pro-Russian separatists in the Ukraine's eastern Donbass region.

Lt. Gen. Hodges made his announcement on his first visit to Kiev where he met with the commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Lt. Gen. Anatoliy Pushnyakov and the acting commander of the NGU Lt. Gen. Oleksandr Kryvyenko. Hodges told reporters after the meeting he was "impressed by the readiness of both military and civil leadership to change and reform."

Pentagon spokeswoman Lt. Col. Vanessa Hillman told *Defense News* the training mission was part of a State Department effort "to assist Ukraine in strengthening its law enforcement capabilities, conduct internal defense, and maintain rule of law." The Obama administration has so far committed $19 million from the Global Security Contingency Fund to help build up and train the NGU.

Disbanded in 2000, the National Guard was reestablished in March of last year in the aftermath of the US and EU-supported and fascist-backed coup that ousted democratically elected President Victor Yanukovych. The new National Guard is being developed as a light infantry, rapid response force aimed at assisting the suppression of the anti-Kiev, Pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbass region.

In addition to the deployment of advisers, the US has also been supplying Ukraine with heavy military equipment necessary to fight the separatists. On Monday, the US Embassy in Kiev announced the delivery of an armored Kozak mine-resistant personnel carrier to the State Border Guard Service (SBGS).

The US also recently delivered 35 smaller armored trucks as well as personal protective gear for use by the SBGS along the eastern border with Russia and against separatist held areas. SBGS spokesman Andriy Demchenko told the *Southeast European Times* the armored vehicles will "depart to the eastern border area for patrolling between checkpoints. Armored vehicles are not required for peaceful areas, we need it [in the east] to increase the efficiency of border monitoring and to protect the State Border Guard Service staff."

In a confrontational move at the end of last year, US President Barack Obama signed into law the Ukraine Freedom Support Act. The bill, which passed unanimously in both houses of Congress, authorizes the president to deliver a cache of over $350 million in military equipment to the Kiev regime over the next three years. This potential aid includes anti-tank and anti-armor weaponry, grenade launchers, mortars, machine guns and surveillance drones.

The intensification of US support for the Kiev regime and its operation against pro-Russia separatists comes as intense fighting and shelling has erupted in the east, particularly in and around the city of Donetsk.

While fighting continued over the strategically and symbolically important Donetsk International Airport, Ukrainian officials acknowledged control over the main terminal had been ceded to the separatists. Despite admitting this loss Ukraine's National Security and

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Defense Council spokesman Col. Andriy Lysenko insisted that Ukrainian armed forces remained in control of the airport runway and control tower.

At least nine civilians were reported killed and another 20 injured Thursday morning when mortar shells struck a public transit stop, destroying a trolley bus and a nearby car. Both sides blamed the other for the deadly attack. Representative of the Donetsk People's Republic accused a covert unit backed by the regime in Kiev, which, they said, had set up inside the city and fired the mortar from the back of a pickup truck.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov released a statement denouncing the attack as a "crime against humanity… aimed at disruption of efforts to regulate the Ukrainian crisis peacefully."

Meanwhile at Unity Day Rally in Kiev, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk blamed Russia for the bus attack, stating, "Today Russian terrorists again committed a terrible act against humanity. Russia bears responsibility for this."

Speaking to reporters on Thursday Ukrainian military spokesman Vladyslav Seleznyov stated that six soldiers had been killed and another 16 taken captive before they decided to pull back. Other social media reports indicate that at least 37 Ukrainian soldiers were killed in the fighting.

Social media posts by George Tuka, head of the nationalist volunteer aid group People's Home Front, stated that a number of soldiers were killed when a portion of the terminal's second floor ceiling collapsed in on them. After months of fighting, the main airport terminal has been laid waste by bombardment from mortar shells and Grad rockets.

On Wednesday, Dymtro Yarosh, head of the fascist Right Sector organization and a member of the Ukrainian parliament, was wounded by shrapnel from a grad rocket in the course of fighting near the airport. Yarosh was leading a volunteer battalion formed by Right Sector, which has been at the forefront of military operations against pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass region.

Fighting also flared up this week near the eastern city of Luhansk. The Ukrainian military claimed that Check Point 31 on the border with Russia came under attack on Wednesday by highly trained Russian soldiers who routed the troops and subsequently took over the post.

In a speech given Wednesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko made the unsubstantiated claim that 9,000 Russian soldiers were currently fighting with the separatists in the east and appealed for more military aid from Europe and the United States. Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary-general of NATO, refused to confirm the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine insisting instead that there had been "an increase in Russian equipment inside eastern Ukraine." As it has in the past, Russia denied the accusations that its soldiers are fighting in eastern Ukraine.

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