

# State of emergency declared in eastern Ukraine, as US vows more sanctions against Russia

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Presaging a further escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk on Monday declared an official state of emergency in the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk. He also announced that the rest of the country would be placed on high alert. The eastern Donbass strongholds of separatists opposed to the regime in Kiev that came to power last year after a US- and EU-supported coup have seen renewed hostilities in recent weeks.

Speaking to reporters in New Delhi, India on Sunday, US President Barack Obama blamed Russia for the renewed fighting in eastern Ukraine and vowed to use all options short of war to escalate political and economic pressure on Moscow.

Obama glibly told reporters that the United States has no interest in weakening Russia or devastating its economy. “We have a profound interest, as I believe every country does, in promoting a core principle, which is, large countries don’t bully smaller countries. They don’t encroach on their territorial integrity. They don’t encroach on their sovereignty. And that’s what’s at stake in Ukraine,” he said.

Obama expressed concern over the collapse of a ceasefire agreement signed in Minsk in September, accusing the pro-Russia separatists of fighting “with Russian backing, Russian equipment, Russian financing, Russian training and Russian troops.” To date neither the US government nor the regime in Kiev has provided any solid evidence backing up their repeated claims of direct Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine.

President Obama vowed to “ratchet up” the pressure on Russia and ominously promised that the US government would consider all options “available to us

short of a military confrontation” to resolve the ongoing conflict.

At the same time that Obama denounced supposed Russian interference in Ukraine, he reiterated that Washington would continue to give economic support to the Kiev regime, as well as provide equipment and training for its armed forces.

It was announced last week that the United States Army would be sending a contingent of advisers to western Ukraine in the spring to train four companies of the National Guard of Ukraine. At the end of last year, Obama signed the Ukraine Freedom Support Act, which authorizes the president to deliver a large cache of lethal military equipment to the Ukrainian government and implement a new raft of sanctions against Russia at his discretion. (See: US announces plans to deploy military advisers to Ukraine).

Obama’s remarks were part of a coordinated response to a deadly artillery attack in the city of Mariupol on Saturday that struck a residential area, killing 30 civilians and injuring approximately 100 others. An investigation by members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that Grad and Uragan rockets were fired into the city from rebel-held territory.

After an emergency meeting of NATO and Ukrainian ambassadors on Monday, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg blamed Russia for the escalating violence in eastern Ukraine. “We condemn the sharp escalation of violence along the cease-fire line in eastern Ukraine by Russia-backed separatists. This comes at great human cost to civilians,” he told reporters.

After the shelling in Mariupol, the president of the

European Council, Donald Tusk, called for new sanctions against Russia after an “urgent” phone call with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The former Polish prime minister bellicosely tweeted, “Once again, appeasement encourages the aggressor to greater acts of violence. Time to step up our policy based on cold facts, not illusions.”

Responding to the new allegations of support for the anti-Kiev forces in eastern Ukraine and threats of escalating sanctions by European and American leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the Ukrainian army of operating as a foreign legion for NATO. Speaking to students in Moscow on Monday, he stated that the operations of the Ukrainian army were tied to the “geopolitical containment of Russia” rather than the “national interests of the Ukrainian people.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the EU and US of using the attack on Mariupol to “whip up anti-Russian hysteria.” He defended the actions of the separatists, saying they were fighting to defend themselves from the Kiev regime’s new offensive. “They started to act...with the goal of destroying Ukrainian army positions being used to shell populated areas,” he told reporters in Moscow.

Alexander Zakharchenko, prime minister of the rebel Donetsk People’s Republic, denied that the separatists were responsible for the attack on Mariupol. “Kiev decided to shift the blame on us for its erroneous fire from Grad multiple rocket launchers at residential areas,” he told reporters.

The effort by the US and EU to maintain economic sanctions against Russia has been showing signs of strain in recent weeks, with some countries, such as France and Italy, pressing for the improvement of diplomatic and economic relations with Russia. Last week, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini published a paper that outlined possible ways to begin improving diplomatic relations with Moscow.

In the wake of the Mariupol attack, Mogherini has called for an extraordinary session of the EU Foreign Affairs Council. The foreign ministers of the 28 EU member countries will convene in Brussels on Thursday to discuss possible new sanctions against Russia.

Fighting has flared up in the east in the last two weeks in the wake of an assault launched by the Kiev

regime on separatist-held areas. The pretext for the new attack was the shelling of a commuter bus that killed 13 people in Volnovakha, a small town on the main highway between Donetsk and Mariupol.

Speaking at a rally in Kiev on January 19, President Petro Poroshenko denounced the attack, which he blamed on the separatists, and vowed that his government would “not give away one scrap of Ukrainian land.” That same day the Ukrainian military was authorized by Poroshenko to launch a “massive assault” on separatist-held positions in the east.

The Kiev regime launched an offensive in an attempt to solidify its control over the Donetsk International Airport. In an embarrassing turn of events, pro-Russian separatists succeeded at the end of last week in repelling the attack and dislodging Ukrainian troops and right-wing militia fighters from the airport’s main terminal. The symbolically and strategically important airport, the site of intense fighting between both sides for the last several months, has been nearly completely destroyed by relentless artillery bombardment.

Shelling in Donetsk on Monday damaged a power station at the Zasyadko mine, temporarily trapping 496 miners underground. Temporary power generators were used to bring the mine’s elevators back online and the miners were gradually evacuated.

Pro-Russian separatists have moved to surround the government-controlled town of Debaltseve, where hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers taking part in the renewed offensive have encamped. The town is located on the main highway and rail line connecting the separatist strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk. At least seven Ukrainian soldiers have been reported killed and 24 wounded in the last day of fighting in the Luhansk region.



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