

Fighting in Ukraine intensifies ahead of Minsk talks

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Fighting between Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatists escalated on Monday and Tuesday, ahead of cease fire talks being held today in Belarus. Each side has pushed to make strategic territorial gains ahead of today's meeting.

Delegates from Ukraine, Germany, France and Russia as well as representatives of the separatists and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are meeting today to discuss a possible ceasefire. It would create a demilitarized zone in eastern Ukraine and possibly halt fighting that has killed more than 5,000 people since the Kiev regime launched military operations against pro-Russian separatists in the spring of last year.

Late last night, conflicting reports emerged of a deal involving the withdrawal of heavy military equipment and establishment of an effective means of enforcing a ceasefire. If such an agreement were signed, it would be the second ceasefire since the Minsk Protocol, signed in September, which has been repeatedly violated by both sides over the last several months. The Kiev regime signed that accord when it was in an unfavorable military position—as it is now—and used the ceasefire to prepare a renewed offensive against the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel flew to Moscow at the end of last week to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin as part of emergency diplomatic efforts to avoid the outbreak of full-scale war in Europe. This followed reports that the US government was moving to directly arm the Ukrainian military.

Merkel traveled to Washington, DC on Monday to meet with US President Barack Obama, who has put off making a decision on sending weapons and equipment, including anti-armor missiles, until after the

conclusion of the talks in Minsk.

“If, in fact, diplomacy fails, I've asked my team to look at all options, what other means can we put in place to change Mr. Putin's calculus. And the possibility of lethal defensive weapons is one of those options that's being examined. But I have not made a decision on that yet,” Obama told reporters.

According to *Bloomberg View*, US Secretary of State John Kerry told a closed meeting of US lawmakers gathered in Germany for last weekend's Munich Security Conference, including the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Republican John McCain, that he is in favor of arming the right-wing, pro-Western Ukrainian regime with lethal arms and equipment.

The current government in Kiev was brought to power last February in a US- and EU-backed fascist-spearhead coup that ousted the pro-Russian president, Victor Yanukovich. Since the spring of last year, the regime has been waging a bloody offensive against ethnic Russian separatists in the eastern Donbass region who are opposed to the government's pro-Western alignment.

A renewed offensive and military draft initiated last month by the Kiev regime quickly collapsed, with the separatists responding with their own offensive that achieved territorial gains.

The Kiev regime has faced significant resistance to its mobilization order, implemented in January, severely impacting its ability to carry out military operations in the east. By the end of last month, at least 7,000 people were facing criminal charges for refusing compulsory military service.

In a high-profile incident, Ruslan Kotsaba, a journalist from western Ukraine, was arrested this week on charges of treason after he released a video stating

that he would rather go to prison for draft dodging than fight the pro-Russian separatists in the east. Kotsaba also called on anyone else who was drafted to resist military service.

In recent weeks, the separatists have successfully pushed the Kiev regime's forces out of the Donetsk airport and encircled several thousand pro-government militia forces in the strategic rail town of Debaltseve.

Separatist militias moved into Lohvynove on Tuesday, cutting off access to Ukrainian-controlled territory. Fighting has also been reported in Chornukhyne, seven miles east of Debaltseve.

A spokesman for the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) claimed that separatist fighters had succeeded in completely surrounding the city.

DPR spokesman Eduard Basurin called on Ukrainian forces trapped in Debaltseve to surrender. "We guarantee security to all who lay down their arms. The others will be eliminated. If the enemy attempts to attack in another place, the strike will be repelled. Some 5,000-6,000 Ukrainian servicemen have been trapped in Debaltseve," he stated.

Meanwhile, the fascist Azov Battalion, a part of the Ukrainian National Guard, opened a new government offensive along Ukraine's southern Black Sea coast. The operation is aimed at retaking the city of Novoazovsk, which has been controlled by pro-Russian separatists since August of last year.

The Kiev regime's military spokesman, Andrey Lysenko, told reporters that the purpose of the assault was to return "to the line of demarcation, to their positions, drawn by the Minsk agreements." Oleksandr Turchynov, the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, was also in Mariupol to assist in coordinating the push for Novoazovsk.

In the course of the day's fighting, the pro-Kiev battalion took control of the villages of Pavlopil, Oktyabyr and Shyrokyne, less than 23 kilometers west of Novoazovsk. Separatist-held positions in the village of Kominternove, less than 30 kilometers northeast of Mariupol, were shelled by pro-Kiev forces.

Several rockets struck the Ukrainian military headquarters in Kramatorsk on Tuesday, injuring at least 10 Ukrainian soldiers. Kramatorsk was retaken from the pro-Russian separatists in July of last year after a month-long assault by the Ukrainian military. The city has since been used as the headquarters for the

Ukrainian military's operations in the Donbass.

Rocket strikes in the eastern suburbs of Kramatorsk killed at least seven and wounded another 15 civilians. The Ukrainian government claims that the rockets were fired from the separatist-held city of Horlivka, 80 kilometers to the southeast, but separatist forces have denied responsibility for the attack.

On Monday, the shelling of a chemical plant in Donetsk by Ukrainian forces resulted in a massive explosion, though there were no reported casualties.



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