

Hostilities ease in eastern Ukraine on first day of cease-fire

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Hostilities between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists mostly ceased in eastern Ukraine Sunday as the ceasefire agreement negotiated in Minsk last week came into effect.

The four leaders who negotiated the settlement, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko spoke via telephone and agreed, according to a statement released by the French president, that the situation was “generally satisfactory despite local incidents.”

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius also confirmed that the ceasefire had gone into effect. “We can say that on the whole the truce is observed, though some ceasefire agreement violations have been registered here and there,” he told reporters on Sunday. The rebel-held city of Donetsk reported its first night in several months without artillery shelling.

Over the weekend US and Ukrainian officials, including US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt and President Poroshenko, sought to cast doubts the Minsk agreement before it went into effect. Pyatt tweeted several low quality photographs on Saturday claiming they proved that Russia was deploying heavy artillery in eastern Ukraine, violating the accord before it went into effect.

Speaking on Saturday ahead of the ceasefire deadline, Poroshenko placed responsibility for the implementation of the agreement on the separatists and warned that if new fighting broke out martial law would be declared throughout the entire country. “We are at the crossroads now,” he told reporters. “Either the enemy stops firing, and the de-escalation and the political process begins, or the enemy imposes an escalation of the conflict on us and the whole world.”

Ukrainian military units have used the lull in the

fighting to shore up their positions. The *Guardian* reported seeing at least three trucks full of Ukrainian troops being moved toward government-held positions outside the city of Debaltseve, where as many as 5,000 Ukrainian soldiers remain encircled by pro-Russian separatists.

There were reports Sunday of rocket fire and shelling in and around the city, which serves as a key rail hub between the main rebel-controlled cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. Ukrainian troops reportedly fired on the cities of Yenakievo and Horlivka in a failed attempt to break through the blockade.

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were unable to gain access to the city Sunday to confirm the reports of fighting. They called on both Kiev and the separatists to give them access to all territory in eastern Ukraine. Separatist leader Denis Pushilin denied that the OSCE had asked officials in Donetsk for access to the area.

Ahead of the ceasefire deadline, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, prime minister of the separatist Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), had insisted that the terms of the ceasefire did not apply to the soldiers trapped in Debaltseve as they were considered to be on separatist-held territory. “Any attempt of the Ukrainian armed forces to unblock Debaltseve will be regarded as violation of the Minsk agreements; such attempts will be suppressed, adversaries will be eliminated,” Zakharchenko said.

The pro-Russian separatists have sent cell phone text messages to the several thousand Ukrainian soldiers it has encircled in Debaltseve, calling on them to turn in their weapons and surrender.

Eduard Basurin, a spokesman from the DPR defense ministry, reported that, while hostilities had largely ceased elsewhere, rebel-held positions northwest of

Debaltseve had also come under attack by machine gun and rocket fire from Ukrainian forces early Sunday morning shortly after the ceasefire deadline. Basurin stated that separatist forces “were forced to open fire in response.”

“Over the past night and during the day on Sunday, the situation in the DPR was calm for the first time in months,” Basurin told reporters. “The ceasefire regime there did not come into force in due time. Ukrainian troops blocked in Debaltseve keep on trying to break the encirclement,” he continued. “Our positions, primarily at Logvinovo, were shelled from the town all through the night.”

Shortly after the ceasefire came into effect, Dmytro Yarosh, head of the fascist Right Sector militia and a member of parliament who has been leading fighting in the east, published a statement on the website of the National Guard of Ukraine indicating that the forces under his command were still fighting despite the ceasefire. He reported that two of his “finely armed and equipped battalions continue offensive near Debaltseve and have serious achievements militarily.” His statement was removed from the website several hours later.

In a statement published on his Facebook page Friday, Yarosh had denounced the ceasefire agreement and declared that the Right Sector militia “reserves the right to extend the active hostilities under its own operational plans.”

In southeast Ukraine the fascist Azov Battalion held positions it had gained before the ceasefire in operations against rebel-held positions east of the city of Mariupol. Three of the battalion’s fighters were killed and another 50 injured during fighting in the village of Shyrokyne on Saturday before the ceasefire took effect.

The government reported shelling in the government controlled village of Zolote northwest of Luhansk early Sunday morning. An elderly couple in the nearby city of Popasna was killed Sunday morning after a Grad rocket struck and collapsed their house.

While Ukrainian military spokesman Anatoliy Stelmakh accused the pro-Russian separatists of violating the ceasefire at least ten times since it went into effect, another government spokesman, Andriy Lysenko, reported that there had been no military casualties on Sunday.



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