

Fatal Shootout Torpedoes Geneva Deal

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A pro-Russian militant walking past burned-out cars at a checkpoint outside the city of Slovyansk, where at least one was killed in a shootout Sunday.

The killing of at least one man at a checkpoint manned by pro-Russian separatists outside the eastern Ukrainian city of Slovyansk on Sunday has exacerbated doubts over the implementation of the recently reached Geneva agreement, with Moscow condemning Kiev for failing to restrain armed militants.

"We are surprised that this tragedy happened after Russia, the U.S., the European Union and Ukraine signed the Geneva Statement that called on all the parties to refrain from violence, intimidation and provocations," Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement published Sunday.

The ministry denounced Ukraine for "breaking the Easter truce" and said the militants' provocation illustrated the unwillingness of Kiev to keep its obligations in the Geneva deal.

Ukraine, for its part, hit back at the accusations, with the state security agency calling

the shooting a "cynical" provocation by criminals and agents "who are supported and armed by Russian military intelligence."

Kiev's Interior Ministry also expressed dismay at the speed "with which camera crews from Russian television stations appeared at the scene of the shooting," Reuters reported.

Russia, the U.S., the EU and Ukraine agreed on a plan on the de-escalation of the crisis in Ukraine last Thursday, saying all illegally armed groups must be disarmed and all occupied buildings in eastern Ukraine vacated. But after the shooting and with Moscow and the West having opposing views on which groups are illegally armed, analysts say the agreement may remain in effect only on paper.

"Neither the [pro-Kiev ultranationalist] Right Sector group, nor the [pro-Russian] separatists in eastern Ukraine would implement the demand for disarmament because they both are expecting the other side to implement it first," Alexander Khramchikhin, a military analyst at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, said by phone.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry said no official military operations had been underway on Sunday in Sloviansk and called on Ukrainians to turn in all unregistered weapons.

Media reports on Sunday's shooting varied, with Russia's state-run television channel Rossia 24 saying that five people had been killed in the shooting, three of whom were pro-Russian separatists and two of whom were members of the group that had attacked the checkpoint, which other Russian media said was the Right Sector group.

Reuters said two men were killed, however, and Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said one man was killed and three hospitalized.

Over the weekend, pro-Russian protesters held their ground, refusing to withdraw from the public buildings that they have seized in a number of cities in eastern Ukraine, despite their withdrawal being a provision of the Geneva agreement.

Insurgent leaders explained the move by saying the Geneva agreement must first be applied to Maidan demonstrators and the Kiev authorities, which they say took power through an "illegitimate coup d'etat."

The U.S. dismissed this statement and maintained its earlier stance that the occupation of government buildings was illegal.

"We absolutely reject the comments by the Donetsk separatists that the evacuation of their forces is contingent upon Maidan activities ending their legal and peaceful protests," the U.S. State Department spokesperson, Jennifer Psaki, told reporters Friday.

"There is no parallel whatsoever between the armed and illegal seizures of government buildings, streets, and public spaces in eastern Ukraine and the legal and peaceful protests," she said.

Psaki said it was Russia that must call on the separatists to evacuate, and that if Russia failed to do so, it would face consequences — making it clear that a third wave of sanctions against President Vladimir Putin's inner circle was on the table.

On Friday, U.S. President Barack Obama said he could not be sure that the Geneva agreement would be implemented by Moscow.

"I do not think we can be sure of anything at this point. I think there is the possibility, the prospect that diplomacy may de-escalate the situation ... Our strong preference would be for Mr. Putin to follow through on what is a glimmer of hope coming out of the Geneva talks. But we are not going to count on it until we see it," he said, according to a transcript posted on the White House's website.

Meanwhile, insurgents in the Donetsk region seized a television aerial over the weekend, blocking Ukrainian television channels and giving airtime only to Russian ones. Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, a leader of separatists in Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, said people did not want to watch channels that called them separatists, RIA Novosti reported Saturday.

And in a move that may aggravate East-West tensions further, The New York Times reported Saturday that Obama's new policy toward Russia would be one of complete isolation. Citing Obama's aides, the paper said that the U.S. administration intended to cut off Russia's economic and political ties to the Western world and limit its ambitions in the CIS.

The report said that even if a solution to the ongoing spat between Washington and Moscow over Russia's annexation of Crimea were found, Obama had already concluded that there could never be a constructive relationship with Putin.

In keeping with Obama's new policy of isolation, the report said, one of the candidates to become the new U.S. Ambassador to Russia, John F. Tefft, would likely be an irritant to the Kremlin if appointed.

Tefft previously served as ambassador to Ukraine, Georgia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics that have, to varying degrees, drifted from Moscow's orbit.

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