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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

2 Dead as Ukraine Forces Try to Retake Slovyansk

By The Moscow Times

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A pro-Russian armed man guards a checkpoint near Slovyansk, east Ukraine, on Thursday.

Ukrainian forces troops launched a dawn raid to try to retake the rebel stronghold of Slovyansk on Friday, as pro-Russian rebels shot down two Ukrainian helicopters, killing two crew.

Describing the use of anti-aircraft missiles as proof of the presence of Russian special forces in the eastern town, Ukrainian officials said Slovyansk was "tightly surrounded" and called on separatist leaders to release hostages and surrender.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry said in a statement that two Mi-24 helicopter gunships were shot down by shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles while on patrol overnight around Slovyansk, a city that rebels have turned into a heavily-fortified stronghold. Two airmen were killed and others wounded.

A third helicopter, an Mi-8 transport aircraft, was also hit and a serviceman wounded, the Defence Ministry said. The SBU security service said this helicopter was carrying medics.

The SBU said the downing of the helicopters showed that "trained, highly qualified foreign military specialists" were operating in the area "and not local civilians, as the Russian government says, armed only with guns taken from hunting stores."

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Armed groups seeking union with Russia have seized a number of government buildings in towns in eastern Ukraine. The action in Slovyansk appeared to mark the heaviest military response by Kiev since it tightened a cordon around the city a week ago.

The militants in Slovyansk are holding a number of local people and seven foreign military observers, four of them German, from the European security agency the OSCE.

In a message posted to his Facebook page, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said the goal of the anti-terrorist operation was simple: “Free the hostages, lay down weapons, vacate administrative buildings and get municipal infrastructure back to normal."

He urged local people to stay indoors and said Ukrainian forces, from the Interior Ministry, National Guard and the armed forces, had orders not to fire on residential buildings.

Support for the separatist movement is patchier in eastern Ukraine than it was among the majority ethnic Russian population of Crimea, which Moscow seized and annexed in March.

However, many are fearful of the new authorities in Kiev and have little faith in Ukraine after 23 years of post-Soviet independence marked by rampant corruption and poor living standards.

"Shells came into my garden," said one local man, Gennady. "They say that they have come to defend us. But who from?" he said of the Ukrainian forces. "Civilians must stop them."

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