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OSCE Observers Held in Ukraine Released

By The Moscow Times

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German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen giving a statement to the media with several OSCE observers.

European military observers who were held more than a week by insurgents in eastern Ukraine walked free Saturday, with Kiev insisting the release proves Russia is fomenting unrest in Ukraine — as Moscow touted the insurgents as courageous humanists.

The latest battling narratives came a day after dozens of protesters died while trapped in a horrifying fire in Odessa, hundreds of kilometers away. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the deaths show Ukraine's acting leaders "are up to their elbows in blood," while authorities in Kiev blamed pro-Russian provocateurs.

The incidents highlight the intractability of Ukraine's crisis, in which pro-Russian insurgents have seized government buildings in about a dozen cities and towns in the east and Ukrainian forces have tried to regain control in a limited military offensive. Looming on the other side of

the border are tens of thousands of Russian troops, whom Kiev fears are waiting for a pretext to invade.

A pact struck between Russia, Ukraine, the European Union and the U.S. in mid-April aimed at resolving the crisis emphasized the importance of an observer mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But the mission's prospects became clouded a week later, when eight of its military observers and five accompanying Ukrainians were detained by insurgents in the city of Slovyansk, the crucible of unrest in the east. The insurgents alleged the observers were spying for NATO and carrying suspicious material; one from non-NATO member Sweden was released two days later, but the rest remained in custody until Saturday.

The insurgents' leader in Slovyansk, Vyacheslav Ponomaryov said he ordered the release because of increasing insecurity in the city, Interfax reported In recent days, at least four Ukrainian soldiers were killed on the city's outskirts — two of them when helicopters were shot down — and at least 10 civilians have been killed, according to Ponomaryov.

Ponomaryov later told The Associated Press that the OSCE observers "are not being released — they are leaving us, as we promised them."

One of the released observers, German Colonel Axel Schneider, told The Associated Press that the 12 detainees held up well. Those held included three other Germans and a soldier each from the Czech Republic, Denmark and Poland.

"They had a very good attitude and that gave them the strength to stand the situation," Schneider said of the observers. "According to the word of [Ponomaryov], we have been treated as good as possible. This is a miserable situation, but we were under his protection.

The release negotiations included Vladimir Lukin, a representative of President Vladimir Putin. Lukin was brought in as part of an initiative led by Thorbjorn Jagland, the head of the Council of Europe, a European human-rights body, according to COE spokesman Daniel Hoeltgen. Lukin said the release was "a voluntary humanitarian act," RIA Novosti reported.

Although Russia denies it is encouraging or directing the insurgents, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the release "was made after unambiguous instructions had been received from the Russian authorities, which yet again shows the extremists are subordinated to Moscow."

The Russian Foreign Ministry, however, emphasized that the release was a decision of the insurgents who have taken control of Slovyansk and called it "testimony of the courage and humanism of the defenders."

Despite the release, tensions in Ukraine heightened sharply after at least 42 people died in clashes between government supporters and opponents in the Black Sea port of Odessa on Friday. On Saturday, news reports claimed fighting broke out in the city of Kramatorsk, about 15 kilometers south of Slovyansk.

The Odessa clash began with street fighting between two sides in which at least three people were reported killed by gunfire, then turned into a grisly conflagration when government opponents took refuge in a building that caught fire after protesters threw firebombs inside.

At least 36 people died in the fire, according to the Emergency Situations Ministry. An Interior Ministry statement gave the overall death toll for the day at 42, but did not give a breakdown.

The city's police chief, Petr Lutsyuk, on Saturday issued a statement calling for calm in the city of about 1 million, but hours later he was fired by Interior Minister Arsen Avakov.

Peskov, the spokesman for Putin, said the bloodshed demonstrated the acting government's tolerance of or collusion with nationalist extremists and had driven efforts to resolve the crisis into a dead end.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry blamed pro-Russia adherents for setting off the clash, did not mention the fire, and claimed the "events in Odessa show that separatists' subversive activities in Ukraine are doomed to failure."

Odessa, some 550 kilometers southwest of Slovyansk, had not previously seen significant confrontations in Ukraine's crisis, and the deaths there suggested that violent unrest could spread far from the relatively compact area in the east where it has been concentrated so far.

Odessa is the major city between the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed in March, and the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic where Russia has a military peacekeeping contingent. Some analysts speculate that Russia ultimately aims to take control of a huge swath of Ukraine from Transdnestr to the east.

A three-day mourning period was declared in Odessa on Saturday; mourners came to the fire site to lay flowers. There were no signs of new unrest, but Valery Kaurov, a leader of the anti-government contingent in the city, told Russian state television that protests could resume once the mourning period ends.

There were also signs of a desire for revenge. A page appeared on Vkontakte, a Russian analogue of Facebook, showing photos and stating home addresses of people allegedly responsible for the fire deaths. In Donetsk, the largest city in the insurgent east, demonstrators who stormed the local office of the Ukrainian security service on Saturday evening shouted, "We will not forgive Odessa." No police were deployed to block the building takeover.

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