

7 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed in Separatist Ambush, Defense Ministry Says

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Pro-Russian separatists ambushed Ukrainian troops on Tuesday, killing seven in the heaviest loss of life for government forces in a single clash since Kiev sent soldiers to put down a rebellion in the country's east.

With the uprising and Russia's annexation of Crimea poisoning East-West relations, Moscow retaliated against U.S. sanctions by hitting aerospace projects, including refusing to extend the life of the International Space Station, a showcase of post-Cold War cooperation.

In Kiev, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry and state security service said the troops were killed and seven others wounded when their armored column was ambushed near the town of Kramatorsk, one of several hot spots in the largely Russian-speaking east where the army has had scant success against the rebels.

About 30 rebels, who had taken cover among bushes along a river, attacked with grenade-launchers and automatic weapons near a village 20 kilometers from Kramatorsk, the ministry said in a statement on its website.

"In all, as a result of the prolonged fighting, six members of the armed forces were killed. Eight soldiers were wounded, one of them seriously," it said. The state security service,, or SBU, said later that the seriously wounded soldier had died while being taken to hospital.

Before the Kramatorsk incident, Defence Minister Mykhailo Koval said a total of nine servicemen had been killed so far in the army's "anti-terrorist" operation, which has been directed mainly against rebels in the towns of Slovyansk and Mariupol.

The dead included five air crew, Koval said. They died when their helicopters were downed by separatist fire.

Rebels have also suffered losses in the uprising, which began with the seizure of public buildings in eastern towns and cities. Many of the separatists hope to follow Crimea, which voted for union with Russia before its formal annexation in March.

The U.S. says Russia is backing the rebels while the Kremlin accuses Washington of having helped protesters to topple pro-Moscow Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February.

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