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Ukraine Separatists Down Army Helicopter, 14 Killed

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Interior minister Arsen Avakov published this photograph as proof of the aggression of the Putin regim.

SLAVYANSK, Ukraine — Pro-Russian separatists shot down a Ukrainian army helicopter on Thursday, killing 14 soldiers including a general, as government forces pressed ahead with an offensive to crush rebellions in the east swiftly following the election of a new president.

After weeks of accusations from Kiev of Russian involvement in the uprising, a rebel leader in the eastern city of Donetsk acknowledged that some of his fighters who died in the government offensive had been "volunteers" from Russia, saying their bodies were being returned home across the border.

In Kiev, acting president Oleksandr Turchynov said the helicopter, which had been carrying supplies in eastern Ukraine, had been brought down by anti-aircraft fire from near the town of Slavyansk, which has been under the control of separatists since early April.

It was one of the heaviest losses inflicted by the separatists on the army in two months of unrest in Ukraine's eastern regions, and followed a fierce assault by government forces in

which about 50 rebels were killed earlier this week.

"I have just received information that terrorists using Russian anti-aircraft missiles shot down our helicopter near Slavyansk. It had been ferrying servicemen for a change of duty," Turchynov told parliament.

The bodies of some of the separatists killed this week when the Ukrainian military tried to regain control of Donetsk Airport were being prepared for return to Russia on Thursday, the rebel leader said.

In a stark admission that the rebels were being supported by Russian militia fighters, the leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, said: "Those who are volunteers from Russia will be taken to Russia today."

Interior Minister Arsen Avakov accused the government of President Vladimir Putin of being behind the airport violence. Weapons collected at the airport after the rebels were forced out by airstrikes and a paratroop assault had been brought in from Russia, he said.

"These are not our weapons — they were brought from Russia. Serial numbers, year of production, specific models ... I am publishing this photograph as proof of the aggression of the Putin regime," Avakov wrote on his Facebook page.

Kiev's leaders have long asserted that Russia, which annexed Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in March, has fomented the separatist rebellions in the east of Ukraine with a view to bringing about dismemberment of the country.

Moscow denies this but they also allege that it is failing to stop Russian fighters from crossing the long land border into Ukraine together with truckloads of guns and live ammunition.

Defense Minister Mikhailo Koval said Thursday: "We have put all our forces and equipment into the anti-terrorist operation. We have covered the whole state border."

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday accused the West of pushing Ukraine into "the abyss of fratricidal war", and reiterated his call for an end to Kiev's military offensive.

Fierce Assault

The assault launched last Monday was the first time Kiev has unleashed its full military force against the fighters after weeks of restraint and came the day after Ukrainians overwhelmingly elected Petro Poroshenko as president.

Poroshenko, 48, a billionaire confectionery magnate who became the first Ukrainian since 1991 to win the presidency outright in a single round of voting, marked his clear victory by calling for a swift and effective offensive to crush the eastern rebellions.

Though he is unlikely to be inaugurated before June 7, Poroshenko will have an opportunity to meet Putin when both attend commemorations of the 70th anniversary of World War II's "D-Day" landings in Normandy on June 6. On June 3, Poroshenko is also expected to have talks with U.S. President Barack Obama in Warsaw.

The separatist authorities say those who died on Monday and Tuesday included a truckload of wounded fighters blasted apart as they were driven away from the battlefield. The government said it suffered no losses in the operation, when its aircraft strafed the airport and paratroops landed to reclaim it.

At Donetsk's Kalinin morgue, where the dead from the violence were taken, 30 coffins were laid out in rows on Thursday.

"Yes. They are going to Russia," said an orthodox priest, who was edgy and did not wish to be named.

In another part of the morgue lay a local man, 43-year-old Mark Zverev, who had also been killed in the airport fighting. "Europe should know what is happening. He's not a terrorist. He is a defender of his home, of his people and of his land," said his mother, clutching his portrait.

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