

Air Strike Injures 2 in Key Ukrainian Rebel City as West Fears Russian Intervention

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Air strikes and artillery fire between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian troops in the eastern city of Donetsk have brought the violence closer than ever to the city center, as Kiev's forces move in on the rebel stronghold. With Ukrainian troops encircling Donetsk, Western leaders have accused Russia of building up forces along the border in what some fear may preface an intervention. On Wednesday, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said he believed that the "the threat of a direct intervention [by Russia] is definitely greater than it was a few days ago, or two weeks ago."

Russia's Defense Ministry, however, denied that there was any buildup of troops near the border with Ukraine.

"In Russia's Defense Ministry, such statements simply evoke pity for the speakers at the Pentagon, the State Department and NATO. Seemingly serious people are constantly forced to improvise in the course of their speeches in order to add at least a little bit of gravity

to what they are saying," Igor Konashenkov, a spokesman for the ministry, said in comments carried by Interfax on Wednesday.

The Donetsk city administration said in a statement published online Tuesday that three people had been killed in shelling overnight. In the Kalininsky neighborhood only 5 kilometers east of Donetsk's central square, rebels and civilians were milling around outside after a night of what many said they believed were Ukrainian air strikes. There were eight craters at the scene that appeared to be the result of aerial bombing. As the Ukrainian military intensified its campaign against the rebels, heavily populated areas have increasingly come under attack. Kiev adamantly denies launching artillery barrage and air raids against residential neighborhoods and accuses the rebels of firing at civilian areas. The government has offered little evidence to prove their claims, which Human Rights Watch and others have questioned. Ukrainian security spokesman Andrei Lysenko categorically denied Wednesday that Ukrainian airplanes have carried out air strikes on Donetsk. "The cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as other cities and residential areas, are not being bombed by Ukrainian military aviation," Lysenko said.

Alexander Pivko, an emergency worker at the scene, did not believe it. "It was an aerial attack, and two warehouse workers were injured," he said, adding that no one in the neighborhood had been killed. The only buildings damaged in this industrial neighborhood were a warehouse, a boiler room, and an auto repair shop. But one crater from an explosion was only 10 meters away from a nearby residential building. "I ran with my two children to hide in the basement after the first strike," said Marina Sibekina, a 30-year-old teacher. "A plane was in the air and in about five minutes a second explosion rang out."

"The rebels built a base here, but we are the ones who suffer," she said. The Ukrainian government has moved in swiftly on the rebel forces, ousting them from smaller towns in the region and tightening their grip on the regional capital cities of Donetsk and Lugansk. Donetsk did not see much fighting other than a rebel attempt in May to seize the airport. But the city has come under more shelling in recent weeks, and local authorities estimate that about 200,000 people in the city of 1 million have left their homes. The airport is closed, but buses and trains are still running.

The United Nations has estimated that 1,129 civilians have died in the conflict since April. As the rebels struggle to push back Kiev's forces, the wild card will be whether Russia will come to their rescue. President Vladimir Putin has faced increasing pressure from Russian nationalists urging him to send in the army to back the insurgency, and Western leaders have accused Russia of building up troops along the border with Ukraine. Russia has denied any buildup on the border.

The Russian Defense Ministry on Tuesday also shrugged off U.S. warnings that an air force exercise in southern Russia this week was adding to tensions, saying that the drills are conducted hundreds of kilometers away from the Ukrainian border.

See also:

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