

Ukraine Resolution Depends on Fighting, Not Negotiations, Analysts Say

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said progress had been made at Sunday's talks on the Ukraine crisis.

Fighting raged in eastern Ukraine on Monday even as diplomats said they had made progress in finding a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, and analysts said both sides are seeking military gains to take the upper hand in negotiations.

A day after Russian, Ukrainian, German and French foreign ministers met in Berlin to seek a peaceful solution, a convoy of refugees was attacked by rocket fire near the city of Luhansk, resulting in multiple fatalities, the Ukrainian military said.

Analysts told The Moscow Times that both sides were both preparing for negotiations but trying to score as many military advances as possible in the meantime to give them leverage in future talks.

"The Ukrainian army is active around Luhansk and Donetsk, while the insurgents are engaging in a counter-offensive around the Savur-Mohyla strategic height near the city of Snizhne," said Dmitry Dzhangirov, a Kiev-based political and military analyst.

On the diplomatic level, "the Ukrainian leadership in Kiev is getting ready to meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is set to visit Kiev, while the rebels have replaced their Russian commanders with Ukrainian nationals to turn the situation into an internal Ukrainian conflict," Dzhangirov said in a phone interview from Kiev.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko invited Merkel to visit Kiev this week at the end of their phone conversation Sunday. The visit has not yet been confirmed by Merkel's office.

Three major rebel leaders of Russian nationality have left their posts in recent days and been replaced with Ukrainian nationals. Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, said the top rebels were replaced with Ukrainians to facilitate negotiations with Kiev.

"The sudden departure recently of the top rebel leaders in both Donetsk and Luhansk suggests that Moscow is seeking to field a more authentic and presentable group for eventual future talks," he wrote on the Eurasia Outlook blog Monday.

Refugee Attack

Ukrainian military and pro-Moscow rebels accused each other Monday of firing rockets and mortars at a refugee convoy moving toward the Russian border in an attempt to flee the region of intense fighting around Luhansk. Ukrainian army representatives claimed dozens of civilians had been killed, but these reports were not independently confirmed by the time of publication.

Despite another great loss of human life, the incident will not change the overall situation, just as the downing of Malaysia Airline Flight MH17 in July did not, according to Fyodor Lukyanov, head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a think tank with close ties to the Foreign Ministry.

"The situation has reached a sluggish stalemate in which the Ukrainian political leadership cannot afford anything but outright victory, while it is completely uncertain how they will achieve that when they have to storm Donetsk, a city of a million people," he told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

Vladimir Yevseyev, director of the Center for Social and Political Studies in Moscow, agreed that the rebels' large metropolitan strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk would be difficult to capture without many civilian casualties, despite the Ukrainian army's claims that it is closing in on them.

"Timing is on the side of the insurgents, as Ukraine cannot be in this state of extreme concentration on war forever," he told The Moscow Times. "In addition, winter is coming soon, meaning that Ukrainian leadership will face problems with finding replacement for the Russian gas."

Diplomacy at Work

After the foreign ministers' meeting Sunday, Russia's top diplomat told journalists that "there is progress with regard to several issues."

According to Lavrov, the sides have settled all sticking points over the Russian humanitarian convoy that is parked on the Russia-Ukraine border, and also made progress on border control measures. The sides have failed to achieve progress on a potential cease-fire and political reconciliation, he said.

Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the sides would report back to their state leaders and possibly set another date for talks. According to Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, no date had been set as of Monday.

See also:

['Dozens' Killed in Shelling of Refugee Convoy, Ukraine Says](#)

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