

Russian Humanitarian Aid Convoy Returns From War-Torn East Ukraine

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Hundreds of Russian aid trucks returned home from rebel-held eastern Ukraine on Saturday, highlighting a dire need for long-term assistance to the region where homes and livelihoods have been destroyed by months of fighting.

Ahead of a much-anticipated meeting on Tuesday between the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, German Chancellor Angela Merkel held talks in Kiev with Ukrainian officials and expressed hope for a peaceful solution to the conflict that has claimed more than 2,000 lives.

Russia unilaterally sent hundreds of aid trucks into Ukraine through a rebel-held border point Friday, saying it had lost patience with Ukraine's delaying tactics, a move that Ukraine promptly described as an invasion.

By mid-afternoon Saturday, all the vehicles had returned to Russia, Paul Picard of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe told reporters in the Russian town of Donetsk in the Rostov region. A Russian emergency official said 227 vehicles had taken

part.

An AP reporter on the Ukrainian side of the border was able to look inside about 40 of the white-tarpaulined tractor-trailers and confirmed they were empty. Russia said the trucks carried only food, water, generators and sleeping bags to the hard-hit rebel stronghold of Luhansk.

Ukraine and others — including the U.S., the EU and NATO — denounced the Russian move as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Kiev and Western countries also suggested the convoy could be smuggling in supplies and reinforcements to the pro-Russian separatists fighting the government.

It remained unclear what the Russian convoy had actually delivered, since it only arrived late Friday and unloading all those trucks in just a few hours in a war zone represents a sizable task. AP journalists following the convoy said rattling sounds Friday indicated many of the trucks were not fully loaded.

In towns and cities recaptured by Ukrainian forces from the rebels, the need for something more long-term than a one-time delivery of food and water is glaring. Assistance has been trickling in from the government and international donors, but it is still not enough.

Residents in the city of Slovyansk, which endured a weeks-long siege before the rebels left town in July, were caught between government forces and the separatists for several months and are now largely left on their own after devastating artillery strikes.

Valerie Amos, who oversees UN emergency assistance programs, visited Slovyansk on Saturday to inspect aid efforts.

"This is particularly difficult in some areas in the eastern part of the country where there is ongoing fighting," Amos told The Associated Press.

Rebels have rejected overtures by authorities to provide territory under their control with much-needed aid.

Rows of burned-out houses on the northern fringes of Slovyansk stood as a reminder of the impact of the fighting. Owners could be seen Saturday clearing out the debris from their partially damaged or totally charred homes. Few seem confident they will be able to repair their houses anytime soon.

Yevgeny Bezkorovainy, an unemployed 25-year-old resident of Slovyansk, said his household did not have enough money to repair their shrapnel-scarred roof.

"Somebody said they would help, but it has been two months already, but what help do we see? Everybody is building now off their own back," he said.

One of the countries pledging aid to Ukraine is Germany. Merkel held talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kiev on Saturday and promised 500 million euros (\$660 million) in loan guarantees to support private investment in infrastructure and schools in war-struck areas.

Merkel urged a political solution to the crisis three days before Poroshenko will be meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin in Minsk in their first encounter since June. Merkel said she was looking forward to the outcome of those talks and expressed "hope that at least a step forward will be reached there."

Poroshenko said Ukraine is anxious to bring peace as soon as possible and solve the conflict by negotiations, but "not at the expense of sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine."

Asked what message he intended to convey to Putin, Poroshenko said, "Take away your armed people from our territory and I can promise peace will come to Ukraine very soon."

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden called Poroshenko to praise Ukraine for its restraint in the face of Russia's "blatant provocation and disregard of Ukraine's sovereignty." The U.S. also expressed shock at the news that Lithuanian Honorary Consul Mykola Zelenec was abducted and murdered by separatists in Luhansk and extended its condolences to his family.

Ukraine has retaken control of much of its eastern territory bordering Russia in the last few weeks, but fierce fighting for the rebel-held cities of Donetsk and Luhansk persists.

In Ukraine's Donetsk, the largest city under rebel control, residents reported artillery strikes throughout Friday night and Saturday. The mayor's office said six people were killed, including two who had been waiting for a bus and three others in an artillery strike on their apartment building.

The stadium of Ukrainian football champion Shakhtar Donetsk, a city landmark that had hosted games for the 2012 European championships, was damaged by shelling Saturday.

Unrest in eastern Ukraine began in mid-April, one month after Russia annexed Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula of Crimea. The UN says more than 2,000 people have been killed and 340,000 forced to flee their homes during the fighting.

See also:

[Ukraine Claims 'Direct Invasion' After Russian Convoy Crosses Border](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/24/russian-humanitarian-aid-convoy-returns-from-war-torn-east-ukraine-a38654)

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