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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Shaky Cease-Fire Takes Hold in Ukraine

By Alexey Eremenko

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Rebels guarding a Donetsk checkpoint on Saturday as an uneasy calm crept back into the region after a cease-fire agreement entered into effect Friday.

A tense armistice was settled in Ukraine over the weekend after official Kiev agreed to pardon the pro-Russian rebels and grant autonomy to the territories they hold.

Sporadic infighting continued despite the OSCE-negotiated truce, but large-scale hostilities ceased, to the satisfaction of the Russian and Ukrainian presidents.

But a long-term solution to the conflict remains murky, given the rebels' vows that they are not giving up on independence, the matter at the heart of the war that has raged in eastern Ukraine for the past five months.

The cease-fire came into effect at 3 p.m. Friday following a meeting of the Tripartite Contact Group — comprised of representatives for Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE — in the Belarussian capital of Minsk.

The OSCE published the Minsk Protocol, a list of 12 conditions for the cease-fire, which was also signed by the rebels. The conditions include:

an end to hostilities;

a decentralization of authority and snap regional elections in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (collectively known as Donbass), the hotbed of the insurgency;

pardons for all of the conflict's participants;

the pull-out of all militants, mercenaries and "illegal military formations" from Ukraine;

the release of all "hostages."

The list also advocates the establishment of a dialogue, promotes humanitarian and economic relief to Donbass and spells out the OSCE's role in monitoring the peace effort.

The document was signed by Ukrainian ex-president Leonid Kuchma, Russian envoy in Kiev Mikhail Zurabov, OSCE Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini and two rebel representatives.

The deal comes shortly after a meeting and a phone conversation between Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and President Vladimir Putin, who has long battled accusations of having backed the rebels.

Shooting Goes On

The rebels largely appeared to end their advance on Mariupol, a strategically located Black Sea coastal city they besieged last week.

But the insurgents and Ukrainian forces both reported shelling of their positions in Mariupol over the weekend.

The Ukrainian army continued to fortify the city, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said Sunday.

Ukraine also secured arms supply deals with NATO members France, Italy, Poland, Norway and the U.S., Poroshenko's adviser Yuriy Lutsenko said on his Facebook on Sunday, though the Norwegian Defense Ministry denied any such plans, according to TASS. The U.S. and Poland likewise denied having secured such a deal, Gazeta.ru reported.

Blasts were also reported by the Donetsk airport, where the separatists have cut off and isolated a Ukrainian army contingent.

A humanitarian aid convoy was unable to reach Luhansk on Saturday because of shelling by an undetermined party, the International Red Cross said on Twitter.

Nevertheless, Putin and Poroshenko on Saturday "expressed mutual satisfaction over the fact that the cease-fire regime is largely holding," according to the Kremlin's website.

The chain of command is incomplete on both sides, which could account for the cease-fire violations. Some of the separatist commanders are de-facto independent of the main force, and the Ukrainian army is aided by volunteers and privately raised battalions.

The first two "hostages" — Ukrainian soldiers captured by the insurgents — were released on Saturday, a spokesman for Poroshenko said, Interfax reported.

The OSCE contact group in Minsk said the rebels and Ukrainian forces could be holding up to 1,000 prisoners each, expected to be exchanged under an "everyone for everyone" deal.

Independence in the Air

The pithy Minsk Protocol left much room for interpretation, including on the main question underlying the civil war, the status of the rebel-held territories.

Insurgent leader Igor Plotnitsky, who co-signed the protocol, de-facto disavowed it right after signing, saying in Minsk that the separatists stand by their strategic goal of obtaining independence.

By Sunday, he had relented somewhat, reiterating the insurgency's demand for independence in an interview with RIA Novosti, but adding that the rebels "were willing to compromise [on independence] for the sake of peace."

Kiev should guarantee the Donbass region the right to maintain Russian as an official language, build economic ties with Russia and create armed militias as part of the decentralization of power deal, Plotnitsky also said.

The Ukrainian leadership had not commented on Plotnitsky's statements as of Sunday.

Ukraine is set to hold snap parliamentary elections by October 26, wherein Poroshenko — a war president elected in May on his promise to crush the insurgency — hopes to take control of the Verkhovna Rada, the country's parliament.

Following Crimea

The insurgency in eastern Ukraine broke out soon after Russia's annexation in March of Crimea, a largely Russian-speaking peninsula in the Black Sea.

The rebels, whose leadership — until recently — had consisted largely of Russian nationalists, said they wanted Donbass to follow Crimea's example and join Russia.

But after a number of early triumphs, their military effort began to struggle between Ukraine's rapidly bolstering army forces, and the reluctance of eastern Ukrainian locals to take up arms and fight for secession.

However, the rebels achieved a sudden breakthrough in late August, routing the Ukrainian forces and clutching a foothold on the Black Sea coast.

The separatist command credited their achievements to their own battle spirit and the Ukrainian army's mistakes.

But official Kiev, NATO and the U.S. all said, with various degree of certainty, that the victory was due to Russia sending a limited contingent of elite forces to the rebels' aid.

Amnesty International was the latest organization to blame Russia of "direct interference" in the conflict in a report out on Friday.

The Kremlin denied involvement despite a wealth of evidence, down to Russian paratroopers captured in the combat area.

Russia deployed its troops to Crimea, but denied it until the annexation was complete. Some of the soldiers sent to Crimea have been reported by media as recently slain in eastern Ukraine.

Amnesty Blames

At least 2,900 have died in eastern Ukraine and about 600,000 have been displaced since the outbreak of hostilities in April, according to the UN's latest figures published on Friday.

Both sides have also engaged in a fierce information war, accusing each other of atrocities.

And indeed, both sides appear to have committed war crimes, the Amnesty International report said.

On the Ukrainian side, the main offenses were indiscriminate shellings of urban territories where the rebels had set up bases, the London-headquartered watchdog said.

As for the rebels, the report said that "witnesses [among locals] also said that separatist fighters abducted, tortured, and killed their neighbors."

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