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OSCE Says Outlook For Peace in Ukraine Is 'Bleak'

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A destroyed tank is seen along a road on the territory controlled by the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic near airport of Luhansk, in Luhansk region, eastern Ukraine, Nov. 19, 2014.

Prospects for peace in eastern Ukraine are "bleak," underscoring the need to uphold a shaky cease-fire between government forces and pro-Russian separatist rebels, a senior official from the OSCE security watchdog said Thursday.

Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's envoy to the Trilateral Contact Group that includes senior representatives from Ukraine and Russia, said there was no alternative to peace accords signed in Minsk in September, no matter how dire the situation.

"Whatever [their] shortcomings may be and wherever they may need to be supplemented, the [Minsk] documents are the door on the road to peace in eastern Ukraine, and they will continue to be so," she told a meeting of the 57-member OSCE in Vienna.

"I am unable to accept any remarks that the cease-fire arrangements of Minsk have fallen

apart. Yes, it has been broken many times but it is the only agreement in place which has any restraining power on the use of force."

Fighting in eastern Ukraine has killed an average of 13 people each day in the eight weeks since the cease-fire agreement, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said Thursday. At least 4,317 people have been killed and 9,921 wounded since April.

The OSCE's special monitoring mission, or SMM, in eastern Ukraine said military personnel shot in the direction of one its convoys near the rebel stronghold of Donetsk on Wednesday. It did not say which side was responsible for the firing, the first apparent instance of the SMM being targeted.

Tagliavini said the situation had not improved since world leaders met last weekend in Australia, where they threatened President Vladimir Putin with more sanctions. Fighting continues at key locations including Donetsk Airport and the outskirts of the coastal city of Mariupol.

She said the conflict could escalate, with severe consequences for the region and beyond, if not handled with care. "The outlook is still bleak," she added, citing reports of a new military buildup in the conflict zone.

Ukraine has accused Russia of violating the Minsk Accord by failing to stop arms and fighters crossing into its territory, supplying the separatists with weapons and keeping Russian forces in Ukraine. Moscow denies these charges.

Russia is pressing Ukraine to hold direct talks with separatist leaders, but Kiev is refusing, saying this would imply recognition of 'people's republics' they have set up in eastern Ukraine. "We will not hold direct talks with your mercenaries," Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said Wednesday.

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