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As Ukraine Honors 'Day of Silence,' Lavrov Says Peace a 'Long Way Off'

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Separatists ride on a tank at the town of Khartsyzk, east of Donetsk, Dec. 7, 2014.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that an easing of tensions in eastern Ukraine was still a long way off, despite an announcement by Kiev that it had suspended combat operations against pro-Russian rebels.

Lavrov said negotiations meant to accompany the unilateral truce, dubbed the Day of Silence in Ukraine, would take place in "the coming days," though no day has been set for the talks.

In the city of Donetsk, the separatists main stronghold, a Reuters correspondent said that firing was heard up to 9 a.m. but later appeared to have slackened off.

"The Ukrainian military have suspended all combat actions and are ready for the Day of Silence, but if separatists attack we will fire in response," a military spokesman said by telephone.

The Ukrainians have billed the Day of Silence a litmus test for the readiness of Russian-

backed separatists to reinforce a cease-fire that was agreed three months ago but that has been regularly breached with almost daily deaths among government forces, civilians and rebels.

If it holds, it could improve prospects for a renewal of peace talks in the Belarussian capital Minsk later this week involving Russia, Ukraine and separatist leaders under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Speaking about steps taken in previous months to reduce tensions in eastern Ukraine where pro-Russian rebels took up arms in April, Lavrov told RIA news agency in an interview: "As of yet, it is fully obvious that we are far from that goal."

Kiev and the West accuse Russia of arming the rebels and supplying them with troops, charges Moscow denies.

The government forces and pro-Russian rebels have both flouted a Sept. 5 truce. Talks, under the auspices of the OSCE, were meant to work toward cementing the truce by agreeing on measures such as moving heavy weapons away from the front line.

"In the coming days, a meeting of the contact group is planned, in which will be discussed a plan prepared by military specialists of practical measures ... with the aim of a final cease-fire," RIA quoted Lavrov as saying.

Talks were planned in Minsk, the site of previous meetings, including one that clinched the Sept. 5 cease-fire deal, but RIA said Kiev wanted the talks to be carried out on Tuesday while rebels wanted more time and to hold the talks on Friday.

Lavrov also warned in the interview with RIA that Russia would be forced to take "adequate measures" against U.S. plans to establish an anti-missile system in Europe, which Russia has long complained was meant to target Russian missiles.

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