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Kerry Says U.S. Could Lift Sanctions Within Days If Russia Continues 'Positive' Steps

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry delivers remarks during a news conference at the U.S. Embassy in London on Dec. 16, 2014.

Russia has made constructive moves in recent days towards reducing tensions in Ukraine, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Tuesday, and he raised the possibility that Washington could lift sanctions if Moscow keeps taking positive steps.

Speaking in London, Kerry said the United States and Europe could lift sanctions within days or weeks if President Vladimir Putin keeps taking steps to ease tensions and lives up to commitments under cease-fire accords to end the Ukraine conflict.

"These sanctions could be lifted in a matter of weeks or days, depending on the choices that President Putin takes," Kerry told reporters.

"Their sole purpose here is to restore the international norm with respect to behavior

between nations," to ensure respect for borders, sovereignty and rights, he said.

In Washington, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said President Barack Obama was expected to sign legislation this week authorizing new sanctions on Russia over its activities in Ukraine and providing weapons to the Kiev government.

Obama would have to decide whether to impose the new sanctions. He has said he does not want to take new steps that are not synchronized with European partners.

French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a four-way telephone call with Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Tuesday evening, Hollande's office said.

The two Western leaders called for a rapid resumption of contacts under the September Minsk cease-fire agreement.

Hollande and Merkel "stressed the importance of moving forward without losing any more time," the statement added.

Easing of More Sanctions?

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said there was no discrepancy between Kerry's comments and the White House announcement over possible new sanctions.

"Russia has a choice. There are specific steps they can make to implement the Minsk protocols," Psaki said.

"They can do that. That's in their power, and if they do that, obviously that will have an impact on the actions we take," she told reporters in Washington.

Psaki said the United States viewed reports of a decrease in violence in eastern Ukraine as a positive step and an opportunity for a lasting political solution.

"But I don't want to overstate that," she said. "And that's one of the reasons [Kerry] also reiterated ongoing concerns we have," she said at a news briefing.

Poroshenko on Tuesday hailed a brief period of calm in which there was no shooting in eastern Ukraine as a positive signal.

The United States and Europe imposed sanctions against Russia after its annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and Kremlin backing for armed pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's eastern regions. Moscow's actions have provoked the worst crisis between Russia and the West since the Cold War.

Russia's currency, the ruble, plunged against the dollar on Tuesday.

Asked about the ruble's collapse, Kerry cited not only Western sanctions but also factors such as sliding oil prices and the Russian economy.

"There are a lot of combined factors, but the sanctions were clearly intended to invite President Putin to make a different set of choices."

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