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Ukraine Reports First Death of Soldier in War With Rebels in 2015

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A Ukrainian serviceman walks at a checkpoint near the eastern Ukrainian town of Debaltseve in Donetsk region.

KIEV — Ukraine on Friday reported its first military death of 2015 in its conflict with pro-Russian separatists, saying a soldier had been killed and five others wounded in attacks by the rebels.

More than 4,700 people were killed in 2014 in the conflict, which has provoked the worst crisis in relations between Russia and the West since the Cold War.

"In the past 24 hours one Ukrainian serviceman has been killed and another five have been injured because of provocative actions [by separatists]," military spokesman Andriy Lysenko told a news briefing.

Lysenko gave no details of the circumstances of the attack but he said there had been frequent shelling and mortar attacks by separatists in areas of eastern Ukraine, including around the international airport in the big industrial city of Donetsk.

He said Ukrainian forces were in general abiding by the terms of a shaky ceasefire agreed in September and were only replying when they came under fire.

"In general, our servicemen are not giving in to provocations and are not opening fire," he said.

There was no confirmation of the reported attacks by the separatists themselves.

Ukrainian authorities and separatists exchanged hundreds of prisoners of war last week as part of a 12-point plan to end the conflict. On the diplomatic front, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko is preparing to meet Russia's Vladimir Putin and the leaders of France and Germany on Jan. 15 in Kazakhstan.

The German Foreign Office said the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France had discussed the situation in eastern Ukraine in a telephone conference on Friday, as well as which steps to take next in implementing the plan. They agreed the next meeting of the so-called "contact group" should take place as quickly as possible.

Poroshenko, who has acknowledged that Kiev lacks the military means to take back lost territory by force, warned Ukrainians in a New Year's message on Thursday that they should be braced for a year that would "not be easy."

The crisis blew up after street protests in Kiev overthrew a Moscow-backed president last February and a pro-Western leadership took over, committed to integrating the former Soviet republic into the European mainstream.

This set Kiev and the Western governments backing it at odds with Russia, Ukraine's former Soviet overlord, which wants to keep Ukraine within its political and economic orbit.

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