

Ukraine's Military Says Troops Retake Most of Donetsk Airport From Rebels

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A new volunteer for the Kiev-loyal Azov battalion embraces his girlfriend before heading to the eastern frontlines.

Ukrainian troops launched a "mass operation" overnight, retaking almost all the territory of Donetsk airport in eastern Ukraine lost to separatists in recent weeks, military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said on Sunday.

The army's offensive at the airport brought the fighting close to the city of Donetsk itself, center of a pro-Russian separatist rebellion. Residents reported intensified outgoing shelling including from residential areas in central parts of the separatist-held city.

"The decision was taken for a mass operation ... We succeeded in almost completely cleaning the territory of the airport, which belongs to the territory of Ukrainian forces as marked by military separation lines," Lysenko said in a televised briefing.

Lysenko said the operation had returned the battle lines near the airport to the previous status quo and that the Ukrainian army had thus not violated the Minsk 12-point peace plan agreed with Russia and separatist leaders last September.

Four Ukrainian soldiers had been killed and 32 injured in the past 24 hours, he said.

With attempts to restart peace talks stalled, pro-Russian rebels have stepped up attacks in the past week, seizing from government troops parts of the airport, which is of strategic value to both sides.

"It was impossible to sleep — explosions, the walls were shaking. It seemed like they were firing from near the building ... The DNR (rebel) army were firing from our district," 53-year-old advertising executive Alla said by telephone.

A ceasefire agreed at the talks in Minsk, capital of Belarus, in early September was regularly violated from the start by both sides.

The World Health Organisation says more than 4,800 people have been killed in the conflict pitting Kiev's forces against separatists whom the West say are supported and armed by Russia.

Despite what Kiev and the West says is incontrovertible proof, Russia denies its troops are involved or that it is funnelling military equipment to the separatists.

With its runways pitted and cratered, the airport itself, with a multi-story control tower and extensive outbuildings, has long since ceased to function.

But its hulk, battered by shelling and gunfire, has taken on symbolic value for both sides with troops and separatists hunting each other often at close range in a deadly cat-and-mouse game among the ruins.

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