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Germany's Merkel Hopes For Progress at Ukraine Peace Talks

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel

Germany's Angela Merkel said on Wednesday she hoped a new round of talks with Ukraine and Russia in Berlin could help implement an elusive ceasefire in eastern Ukraine, but warned against expecting too much, given another upsurge in the violence.

With pro-Moscow rebels intensifying their attacks and Kiev planning to boost its armed forces in response to what it called an increased Russian troop presence, Berlin urged a political solution, saying neither side could win by military means.

The German chancellor said the goal of Wednesday's meeting of the Ukrainian, Russian, French and German foreign ministers was to try to reschedule a summit of those countries in the Kazakh capital Astana, which was called off last week due to renewed fighting.

"We don't want another meeting of presidents that yields no results," Merkel told a news conference. "Therefore I hope that today maybe some structures can be set up.

"But I'm not sure, I don't want to get hopes up too much," she added. "It is clear that the ceasefire is getting more and more fragile."

Kiev and Moscow blame each other for failing to implement a ceasefire agreed in Minsk last September to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine, where more than 4,800 people have been killed in fighting between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian rebels.

Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko, speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos on Wednesday, said Russia had 9,000 troops on Ukrainian soil and he called on Moscow to withdraw them.

The Berlin talks, due to begin at 8 p.m. at a government guest house near Tegel Airport, will be the fourth such meeting hosted by Germany. The last round ended with a joint statement acknowledging they were not ready for the Astana summit, which had been tentatively scheduled for last Thursday.

After Kiev announced plans to increase its military by 68,000 personnel, the German Foreign Ministry said the Ukrainian government was within its rights to take measures "to defend the sovereignty of the state and its territory".

"But we believe that neither the separatists nor the Ukraine state can win this conflict by military means," added German foreign ministry spokesman Martin Schaefer. "Only a political solution will work, brought about by dialogue."

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