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Russia Warns West Not to Resort to Blackmail Over Ukraine Crisis

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People remove debris near the building damaged by shelling on Saturday in Mariupol, eastern Ukraine, Jan. 25, 2015.

Russia blamed Kiev on Monday for a surge in fighting in Ukraine and warned the West that any attempt to increase economic pressure on Moscow would be "absolutely destructive" blackmail.

Pro-Moscow separatists, backed by what NATO says are Russian troops, have launched an offensive in southeastern Ukraine and U.S. President Barack Obama said Washington was considering all options short of military action to isolate Russia.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied any Russian involvement in the fighting and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the West of whipping up anti-Russian hysteria to justify extending economic sanctions against Moscow.

"Instead of increasing pressure on those who refuse to engage in dialogue to resolve the conflict peacefully, we see renewed talks about blackmailing Russia economically," the RIA

Novosti news agency quoted Peskov as saying.

"Russia has never agreed with such threats, and such threats and blackmail have never led to anything and never will ... renewed threats of increased economic pressure on Russia are an absolutely destructive, unjustified and ultimately short-sighted approach."

Lavrov said the separatists in Ukraine were responding to attacks by government forces and the only way forward was through direct dialogue.

"We see attempts to derail the peace process and attempts again and again by the Kiev leadership to solve the problem by using force to suppress the southeast. These attempts lead nowhere," Lavrov told a news conference.

The European Union has called an emergency meeting of foreign ministers of its 28 member states for Thursday.

"We expect our Western partners ... not to do anything that gives the Kiev authorities the impression that all their actions automatically will win support in the West," Lavrov said.

He accused the West of "chronic" finger-pointing at Moscow over the Ukraine conflict, in which more than 5,000 people have been killed in more than nine months of fighting.

Lavrov said it would have been naive to believe the separatists would accept being shelled by government forces without responding.

He said the rebels had started actions to "eliminate the positions from which the Ukrainian armed forces had shelled populated areas with heavy weapons."

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