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8 People Killed in 24 Hours as Fighting Intensifies in Eastern Ukraine

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KIEV — Five Ukrainian soldiers and three civilians have been killed as a result of fighting in Ukraine's separatist eastern regions in the past 24 hours, Kiev authorities said Thursday, reporting no let-up in violent clashes with pro-Russian rebels.

A separatist advance launched last week appears to have buried the frequently violated truce, leading to a sharp increase in casualties in a conflict that has already killed over 5,000 since it erupted last April.

The Kiev military said separatists shelled Ukrainian army positions in more than 100 separate attacks in the past day, describing the situation across the conflict zone as "tense."

It said fighting was particularly fierce at the strategic town of Debaltseve, where government troops are defending their positions from rebels who have vowed to encircle it to safeguard their main strongholds.

"Information that Debaltseve can be encircled does not correspond to the facts: the frontline

[there] has been stabilized," military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said in a televised briefing.

The interior ministry said three civilians had been killed by "continuous" rebel shelling of the town and surrounding areas in the past 24 hours.

On the other side, the rebels said Ukrainian forces had attacked their positions near Donetsk airport and Debaltseve 10 times since Wednesday, separatist-run DAN news agency reported.

Local volunteers helping those afflicted by the fighting in Debaltseve described a worsening humanitarian situation in the town, which they said had been pounded by near-constant shelling for days.

"Everything is bad in Debaltseve, people are living full-time in shelters without fresh air," said Nathalia Voronkova, who has been helping residents escape the area, where most power and water supplies have been cut off.

"Children are getting sick and there is a great need for medicine," she said.

Both sides accuse the other of escalating the conflict and Wednesday that a rebel commander said the terms of the cease-fire agreement, signed in the Belarusian capital of Minsk in September, were no longer effective.

The next round of talks between Ukraine, Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on the crisis will take place in Minsk on Jan. 30, the TASS news agency reported the Belarussian foreign ministry as saying Thursday.

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