

Ukraine Peace Talks Aborted as Civilians Killed in Donetsk

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Denis Pushilin (C), representative of the separatist self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, and Vladislav Deinego (2nd L), representative of the Luhansk republic, speak to the media before leaving Belarus at Minsk's International airport, Jan. 30, 2015.

MINSK/DONETSK — Civilians were killed on both sides in heavy fighting in eastern Ukraine on Friday, while an attempt to reopen peace talks in neighboring Belarus was aborted before it began.

Two rebel delegates flew to the Belarus capital Minsk, only to announce that talks would not take place on Friday and that they were flying back to Moscow. Any talks would be the first since a five-month-old cease-fire collapsed with a new rebel advance last week.

The main rebel stronghold Donetsk echoed to the sound of heavy artillery fire, including salvos from multiple rocket launchers and heavier thuds from artillery coming from the direction of the airport, a constant battlefield.

A cameraman in Donetsk saw four covered bodies near a cultural centre hit by artillery, and a

fifth dead person in a badly-damaged car nearby. A woman was weeping by one of the bodies. Humanitarian aid was being distributed at the centre when the shell struck.

A kilometer away, a sixth dead person lay where a trolleybus had been hit. The separatists said the total death toll in those two strikes was seven.

Kiev said Friday's shelling of Donetsk was carried out by the rebels themselves to ruin the chance of peace talks. Both sides have made similar allegations throughout the conflict, which are impossible to verify.

"We are already used to this artillery and there's nothing we can do about it. Our boys are defending us," said Alla, a shopkeeper in downtown Donetsk.

The head of Ukraine's regional police said in a Facebook post that seven other civilians had been killed and 10 injured as a result of fighting in an around the government-held small towns of Debaltseve and Vuhlehirsk, focus of the rebel advance.

Water and electricity have been cut off in the towns, where government garrisons are all but encircled by rebel fighters.

Kiev's military said five of its servicemen had been killed and 23 wounded in fighting in the past 24 hours, describing the situation in the conflict zone as "hard."

"They are repeatedly using Grad [missiles], artillery, mortars, tanks and rocket launchers," spokesman Andriy Lysenko said in a televised briefing. "The fiercest fighting continues around the town of Vuhlehirsk. After mass artillery attacks, the terrorists repeatedly stormed Ukrainian army checkpoints."

The past week has seen by far the worst fighting in Ukraine since the cease-fire was signed five months ago, with the rebels announcing an offensive that Kiev says amounts to a full repudiation of the truce.

NATO and Kiev accuse Russia of sending thousands of troops to support the rebel advance with heavy weapons and tanks. Moscow denies it is directly involved in fighting over territory that the Kremlin refers to as "New Russia."

European Union foreign ministers agreed at an emergency meeting on Thursday to extend for another six months economic sanctions against Russia that had been due to expire soon. Washington has promised to tighten its own sanctions, which have helped feed an economic crisis in Russia.

The arrival of rebel negotiators in Minsk, where last year's cease-fire was first reached as part of a peace deal in September, was the first sign of a reopening of negotiations since the rebels launched their latest advance.

But neither Kiev nor Moscow confirmed that they were ready for talks, and one of the rebel officials, Denis Pushilin, swiftly announced they were heading back to Moscow. He said the rebels were prepared to press on with their offensive and seize more territory if artillery continues to fall on Donetsk and other cities they control.

"If shelling resumes, then we reserve for ourselves the right to continue the offensive and go to the very borders of Donetsk and Luhansk regions," he said, referring to the two provinces where separatists have declared "people's republics".

Fear of Assault

So far, most fighting in the rebels' latest advance has taken place near the capitals of the two regions and near Debaltseve, a government-held small town controlling a road and rail route linking the two main rebel strongholds.

The immediate fear of Kiev and its NATO allies is of a rebel offensive on Mariupol, a port of 500,000 people which is by far the biggest government-held city in the two restive provinces.

It was hit by shelling on Saturday which Kiev said killed 30 civilians, although the rebels have since denied that it is a target for now. The rebels halted at its gates during their last big advance five months ago.

The rebels have said their principal aims in the advance are to push government guns out of range of their cities, and make their positions more secure by "straightening out the front" — choking off a government-held pocket around Debaltseve.

Both are moves that would make existing rebel areas more defensible over the long term, if, as many Western countries say they suspect, Moscow's aim is to pursue a stable "frozen conflict" in eastern Ukraine.

A rebel assault on Mariupol, with the potential to unleash unprecedented urban warfare, is a far more dangerous prospect. While the rebels say they are not trying to capture it yet, they have repeatedly said they reserve the right to do so, a threat they may be holding out to obtain better terms at talks.

The Ukrainian foreign ministry said it was ready to participate in talks either Friday or Saturday but it was waiting for an agreement on draft documents about implementing last September's Minsk agreements, including on withdrawing heavy military equipment.

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