

Ukraine Peace Summit Overshadowed by Deadly Rebel Assault

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A Ukrainian serviceman guards the street next to the remains of a rocket shell in the town of Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine on Feb. 10, 2015.

DONETSK, Ukraine — The leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine were due to attend a peace summit on Wednesday, but Ukraine's pro-Moscow separatists diminished the chance of a deal by launching some of the war's worst fighting in an assault on a government garrison.

Kiev said 19 of its soldiers were killed in a day of pro-Russian separatist assaults at a single location near the railway hub of Debaltseve, some of the worst losses it has reported in nine months of war.

Rebels who tore up a five-month-old truce in January are trying to encircle government forces in Debaltseve, a strategic location that would let them link up their main strongholds.

The summit is being held in neighboring Belarus under a Franco-German proposal to try to halt the fighting. Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Francois Hollande will meet Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko and Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Hopes for a breakthrough are slim, with European officials acknowledging that the advancing rebels are unlikely to agree to halt and go back to previous positions.

A surge in fighting in the 24 hours before the leaders were to gather, including a rocket attack that killed 11 people deep in government-held territory on Tuesday, could be intended to force Poroshenko to accept a deal recognizing the rebel advance.

Hours before the talks were due to start, officials still spoke of the possibility that the meeting would be called off.

"There are a number of problems which remain to be resolved ... but it is very likely to go ahead," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told France Inter radio. "It is really a last-chance negotiation."

Still, Moscow maintained its optimism. A Russian diplomatic source said it was 70 percent likely that an agreement would be reached.

"The presidents aren't traveling [to Minsk] for no reason," the source said.

Advantage

Well more than 5,000 people have been killed so far in a conflict in which Kiev accuses Russia of supplying separatists with men and weapons to further the break-up of Ukraine. Moscow denies it is involved in fighting for territory Putin calls "New Russia."

If the French and German leaders were hoping their peace initiative would be met by conciliatory moves on the ground, the prospect of talks appears to have triggered the opposite, with the pro-Russian rebels determined to drive home their advantage.

Armored columns of Russian-speaking soldiers with no insignia have been advancing for days around Debaltseve. Last week they captured the small town of Vuhlehirsk next to Debaltseve, and a reconnaissance unit was there on Tuesday salvaging equipment from abandoned Ukrainian trenches.

The squad's commander said his men did not want a truce while they had government forces on the run.

On the Russian side of the border, Moscow announced war games on Tuesday on the eve of the talks.

The U.S. has been openly discussing arming the Ukrainian government, a move that is opposed by European allies who say it would escalate the conflict while falling far short of giving Kiev the firepower needed to win.

U.S. President Barack Obama says he has yet to make up his mind on the question of sending weapons. He spoke by phone overnight to Putin, and the White House said he warned

the Russian leader that the costs would rise if Moscow kept aiding the separatists.

Kiev military spokesman Vladyslav Seleznyov, briefing journalists on rebel attempts to encircle government forces holding Debaltseve, said the 19 soldiers had been killed "in shelling, rocket attacks and military clashes."

Poroshenko visited Ukraine's military headquarters in the government-held town of Kramatorsk overnight, where seven civilians and four soldiers were killed by rockets fired at a target that was nowhere near the front line.

"This is a crime against humanity. This is almost 50 kilometers from the front line and the Russian-backed rebels and terrorist attacking civilians, attacking the peaceful city of Kramatorsk. This is absolutely unacceptable.

"These crimes should be punished. We demand an immediate, unconditional cease-fire, the closing of the border, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Ukrainian territory," he said.

In separatist-held territory, one person was killed on Wednesday when a shell hit a bus station in the city of Donetsk, east Ukraine, a witness said.

The body of a man could be seen behind the wheel of a minibus after a shell fell through the roof of the station, burning up the vehicle and another beside it, he said.

Emergency services at the scene said another person had died in hospital following the attack, while two people were seriously wounded. There was no immediate comment from rebel authorities or the Kiev-controlled regional administration.

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