

Ukraine Troops Retreat as Embattled Debaltseve Falls to Rebels

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Ukrainian armed forces take their position near Debaltseve, eastern Ukraine.

ARTEMIVSK, Ukraine — After weeks of relentless fighting, the embattled Ukrainian rail hub of Debaltseve fell Wednesday to Russia-backed separatists, who hoisted a flag in triumph over the town. The Ukrainian president confirmed that he had ordered troops to pull out and the rebels reported taking hundreds of soldiers captive.

Associated Press reporters saw several dozen Ukrainian troops retreating with their weapons Wednesday morning from the town in eastern Ukraine, covered in dirt and looking exhausted. Some were driving to the nearby town of Artemivsk in trucks while several others, unshaven and visibly upset, were on foot.

One soldier spoke of heavy government losses, while another said they had not been able to get food or water because of the intense rebel shelling. A third spoke of hunkering down in bunkers for hours, unable to even go to the toilet because of the shelling. They smoked cigarettes in the frigid winter air and gratefully accepted plastic cups of tea given to them by locals.

"We're very happy to be here," the hungry soldier said. "We were praying all the time and already said goodbye to our lives a hundred times."

Russian Channel One showed the rebels hoisting their flag over a high-rise building in Debaltseve. Russian state-owned television also showed images of several dozen captured Ukrainian troops being escorted along a village road by the rebels.

Semyon Semenchenko, a volunteer battalion commander and a member of the Ukrainian parliament who was highly critical of the government's decision to retreat, said in a statement that 167 injured soldiers have been evacuated from Debaltseve. He mentioned a high death toll and said some bodies had been left behind but did not give specific numbers.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko sought to portray the withdrawal as a tactical decision that "laid shame on Russia." He denied reports of large Ukrainian casualties and rebel claims of many soldiers captured, saying troops were leaving Debaltseve with their weapons and ammunition. He said the army had withdrawn 80 percent of its troops from the town by Wednesday morning and two more columns had yet to leave.

"Debaltseve was under our control, it was never encircled. Our troops and formations have left in an organized and planned manner," he said in televised comments.

"The Ukrainian troops ... gave a blow in the teeth to those who were trying to encircle them," Poroshenko said at a Kiev airport as he traveled to eastern Ukraine to "shake the hands" of the soldiers leaving Debaltseve.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, on a visit Tuesday to Budapest, had urged Kiev to admit defeat in the contested town, saying "the only choice" of the Ukrainian troops was to "leave behind weaponry, lay down arms and surrender."

Despite reports of Ukrainian forces giving up the fight for Debaltseve, rebel artillery and rocket fire were still being shot at the town at regular intervals Wednesday.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg accused the separatists of refusing to respect a cease-fire agreement and urged Russia "to end support for separatists and to withdraw forces and military equipment from eastern Ukraine." Russia has denied supplying the separatists with troops and weapons, a claim scoffed at by Western nations and Ukraine, who point to NATO satellite pictures of Russian weapons in eastern Ukraine.

The withdrawal from Debaltseve attracted fierce criticism from Ukrainian nationalist politicians. Semenchenko, the battalion commander, on Facebook accused the military command of betraying the country's interests in Debaltseve.

"We had enough forces and means," he said. "The problem is the command and coordination. They are as bad as can be."

The fierce fighting around Debaltseve, which links the two major separatist cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, had raged on despite a cease-fire deal brokered by European leaders which took effect Sunday.

Some retreating troops said Wednesday they had not received any reinforcements in

Debaltseve from the government and had been walking for a whole day. One Ukrainian soldier who introduced himself only as Nikolai said he was not even sure if his unit was retreating or being rotated elsewhere.

"I don't know. Our commanders didn't tell us whether it's a retreat or just a rotation," he said. "They just told us to change our positions because our unit had been staying there for quite a long time and we had sustained quite big losses."

At a barricade outside the town of Vuhlehirsk, reporters were barred from the road into Debaltseve by a group of fighters. Some of the men identified themselves as coming from Russia's Far East and bore the Asiatic features typical of native people there.

Viktor Ponosov, a rebel commander at the checkpoint, said Ukrainian forces appeared to have run out of ammunition and food.

"We have heard that they are calling their relatives and friends from within the encirclement and saying to them: 'Please help us, because they are killing us and destroying us,'" Ponosov said.

The leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France who negotiated the cease-fire deal that was supposed to take effect Sunday, were expected to talk about its implementation later Wednesday.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini accused the rebels in Debaltseve of acting "in clear violation of the cease-fire."

"Russia and the separatists have to immediately and fully implement the commitments agreed to in Minsk, in line with yesterday's UN Security Council resolution, starting with the respect of the cease-fire and the withdrawal of all heavy weapons," Mogherini said in a statement Wednesday.

In Berlin, the German government also condemned rebels' advance on Debaltseve. Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert described the onslaught as "a serious strain on the [Minsk cease-fire] agreement as well as hopes for peace in eastern Ukraine."

Elsewhere in the conflict zone, rebel leaders said they had begun withdrawing heavy weaponry Wednesday from parts of the front line where the cease-fire was holding. Basurin told Russian Rossiya 1 channel that rebels were pulling back five self-propelled guns from Olenivka, south of the rebel stronghold of Donetsk, on the road to the government-controlled port of Mariupol.

"This is the first step," Basurin said. "We're not waiting for Ukraine to start pulling back the weaponry together with us."

Observers from the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, responsible for monitoring the cease-fire, have been blocked from Debaltseve by the rebels for days. The separatists' Donetsk News Agency quoted rebel official Maxim Leshchenko, however, as saying the OSCE will be allowed to visit "soon."

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