The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Rebels, Kiev Offer Starkly Different Debaltseve Death Tolls

By Allison Quinn

February 19, 2015



A man watches a tank of the separatist self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic Army manoeuvre near a checkpoint on the road from the town of Vuhlehirsk to Debaltseve on Feb. 18, 2015.

As east Ukrainian rebel forces announced that the death toll of their recent capture of key railway hub Debaltseve measured in the thousands, official Kiev offered starkly different casualty numbers, playing down the impact of the recent rebel advance.

"In total, 3,048 were killed in Debaltseve," senior rebel commander Eduard Basurin said Thursday in comments carried by Interfax.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry released a statement Thursday saying the rebel forces had been intentionally playing up the statistics of their own brutality.

"Having no possibility to state their military victories in fighting with the Ukrainian army, the militants have prepared provocation. ... In the information war, the enemy exaggerates the

number of [Ukrainian servicemen that have been] killed and taken captive," said a statement by the Press-Service of the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

The statement read: "While withdrawing from Debaltseve, the Ukrainian troops captured dozens of rebels. Unfortunately, during this redeployment 13 servicemen were killed [and] 157 persons were wounded." The statement added that 82 Kiev-loyal soldiers remained missing.

Semyon Semenchenko, a volunteer battalion commander and Ukrainian federal lawmaker, said in a statement to The Associated Press on Wednesday that 167 injured soldiers had been evacuated from Debaltseve. According to the news service, he said there had been a high death toll and that some bodies had been left behind, but he declined to state specific numbers.

Basurin said earlier that about 10,000 Ukrainian troops had been positioned in the area in a bid to keep Debaltseve out of rebel hands. Fighting between pro-Kiev forces and pro-Russian separatists in the area intensified over the past week, culminating in Russian state television airing footage on Wednesday of rebel forces hoisting their flag in the center of the city as Ukrainian troops retreated.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko announced the pullout of Ukrainian forces from the area on Wednesday, insisting, however, that they had not been encircled by separatist forces as some reports had suggested.

"It was a difficult yet decent operation, which was carried out at night under the powerful shelling of Russian artillery," Poroshenko said in a statement on his website. "We have demonstrated that there was no encirclement. Our troops were able to fulfill the operation and leave Debaltseve."

On Thursday, Poroshenko repeated his earlier statements that the separatists' seizure of Debaltseve was a violation of the cease-fire agreement reached last week during an all-night negotiation session between Poroshenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francoise Hollande.

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/02/19/rebels-kiev-offer-starkly-different-debaltseve-death-tolls-a44045