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Kerry Hints Decision on U.S. Sanctions Against Russia Could Come Soon

By The Moscow Times

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Secretary of State John Kerry testifies at a Senate Appropriations State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Subcommittee hearing, Feb. 24, 2015.

WASHINGTON — U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has said additional sanctions against Russia are "teed up" should events in eastern Ukraine warrant them, and he suggested a decision may come soon.

U.S. leaders will look at whether the Minsk cease-fire plan was being implemented or if there was "some other effort that may be taking place which would immediately merit a much more significant response," Kerry told lawmakers on Wednesday.

A cease-fire negotiated in the Belarusian capital earlier this month was due to go into force on Feb. 15 but was flouted by pro-Russian separatists who continued to fight Ukrainian troops in a successful effort to take the town of Debaltseve.

However, the cease-fire appeared to be slowly coming into force. In rebel-held eastern Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists were withdrawing heavy guns from the front.

Kiev said it was too early to do likewise, but its acknowledgment that most of the front was quiet suggested it, too, could implement the cease-fire.

During a second appearance before lawmakers on Wednesday, Kerry suggested a decision on further sanctions could come soon.

"Plan B is tougher sanctions and additional support to Ukraine," Kerry said, adding that U.S. President Barack Obama would make a decision in consultation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel who, along with French President Francois Hollande, negotiated the latest cease-fire agreement at talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

"We're getting to that critical decision time," Kerry added. "The president has a number of options that he is asking his team to evaluate and he'll make the appropriate decision together with discussions with Chancellor Merkel. In fact he may well have talked to Chancellor Merkel."

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