

Leaders United in Backing Ukraine Cease-Fire Under OSCE Auspices

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French President Francois Hollande repeated demands for an immediate cease-fire in Ukraine and the withdrawal of heavy weapons following a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Monday.

The leaders of Russia, Germany and France agreed to Ukraine's proposal to ask the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to help with the implementation of the cease-fire agreement in eastern Ukraine, officials said after a four-way phone call on Monday evening.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande took part in the phone call in which the leaders also welcomed progress in implementing the cease-fire.

They also said that there is an urgent need for an exchange of prisoners in the conflict region and for humanitarian aid, according to German government spokesman Steffen Seibert.

"The parties involved were in agreement about the urgency of an exchange of prisoners

and the deployment of humanitarian aid through the International Red Cross," Seibert said in a statement after the call.

"As soon as the conditions have been fulfilled, the working group that was set up in Minsk should move forward in tackling further steps, such as preparing the local elections in the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk."

Seibert said that the four leaders "welcomed progress with the agreed-upon cease-fire and the removal of heavy weapons."

He said they agreed that OSCE should play a greater role as observers of the cease-fire agreement and the removal of weapons. They sent a request to the OSCE to publish a daily report on the current developments.

In Paris, Hollande's office said the four leaders had agreed to ask the OSCE to play a more direct role in order to improve the application of the cease-fire and the withdrawal of heavy arms.

Hollande said in a statement they had discussed the application of the Feb. 12 Minsk agreement. "Progress has been noted, but the situation needs to improve," the statement said.

Liberation of prisoners and humanitarian aid need to be facilitated in relation with the Red Cross. Foreign ministry officials will meet on Friday to ensure the monitoring of the application of the Minsk agreement, the statement added.

In Kiev, Poroshenko said in a statement published on his website the three other leaders support Kiev's proposal to put observers from the OSCE security watchdog into areas of eastern Ukraine where the cease-fire is not being observed.

In Moscow, the Kremlin stressed in a statement the importance of strict observation of the cease-fire, continuing the process of withdrawal of heavy weapons under OSCE supervision.

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