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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine Rebels Say Fighting Rages Near Donetsk Despite Cease-Fire

By The Moscow Times

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Pro-Russian rebels transport a damaged tank in the village of Chornukhyne near the town of Debaltseve, north-east from Donetsk, March 12, 2015.

SPARTAK, Ukraine — Heavy machine-gun and light artillery fire pounded a district of Donetsk, the biggest city of eastern Ukraine, on Monday and pro-Russian rebels said there has been no lull in the fighting since a February cease-fire.

The Spartak district, adjacent to the city's now-flattened airport, is one of several sites in eastern Ukraine to have seen continued hostilities between the rebels and Ukrainian government forces since last month's cease-fire, brokered by France and Germany in the Belarussian capital Minsk.

The cease-fire is broadly holding in the rest of the region.

"Not a single day has been quiet here since the deal. One of our guys got killed here today

and we have lost nine in total since the deal," said one rebel fighter who gave his name as Roman and bore the nickname Gruzin, or "the Georgian."

He commands some 120 members of the rebel Vostok (East) battalion in Spartak, an area where most houses and other infrastructure were destroyed during months of heavy fighting for control of the nearby Donetsk city airport.

The airport is now completely destroyed but its ruins lie in an area now controlled by the rebels.

Gruzin's men had two large anti-aircraft guns mounted on a truck and an armed personnel carrier in Spartak.

While the vast majority of Spartak residents fled long ago, several dozen desperate people are holding on, saying they don't want to leave their belongings behind or have nowhere to go.

"The war has been going on for a year here. We are used to it by now, though I guess we should not get used to it. We have a basement and we run there when the fighting gets intense," said 61-year-old resident Yelena.

She lives in a badly damaged house with her 14-year-old daughter Marina who has not been to school since last May.

Both sides in the conflict, in which more than 6,000 people have died since last April, have accused each another of violating the truce. Gunfire came from both sides of the line of contact in Spartak on Monday.

The Kiev government and its Western supporters accuse Moscow of deliberately driving the rebellion in eastern Ukraine by providing the rebels with arms and money and sending serving Russian troops across the border.

Moscow denies direct military participation in the conflict.

The rebels said Monday that they only opened fire when attacked by the Ukrainian troops, but said they did not expect the latest truce to hold for long and they threatened to capture more ground.

Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko said during a visit to Berlin on Monday he wanted European Union leaders to make clear they would impose further economic sanctions against Russia if Moscow did not implement the Minsk cease-fire.

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