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5 Soldiers Dead as Ukraine Conflict Heats Up

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A newly mobilized Ukrainian paratrooper fires an anti-tank grenade launcher during a military drill near Zhytomyr.

Five Ukrainian servicemen have been killed and 12 injured over the past 24 hours despite a ceasefire deal, Ukraine's military said on Wednesday, describing a worsening situation in separatist eastern territories.

The deaths came ahead of a meeting later on Wednesday of envoys from Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE rights watchdog and pro-Russian separatists. They are expected to discuss how to shore up the peace accord they agreed in Minsk, Belarus, in February.

"In the past 24 hours the situation in the conflict zone deteriorated. The intensity of attacks is not falling," military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said, accusing the separatists of using weapons outlawed under the ceasefire deal.

He said four of the servicemen had died when an armored personnel carrier was blown up by a rebel landmine near the town of Avdiyivka, north of the separatist-held city of Donetsk.

The fifth died in a rebel ambush, Lysenko added.

Meanwhile separatists accused Ukrainian government troops of firing overnight on a district of Donetsk in violation of the truce, which was meant to end the year-old conflict in which more than 6,000 people have been killed.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said there was no alternative to the Minsk peace deal.

"Any changes to the format or deviations from the Minsk agreements are unacceptable," he said in a statement.

On Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused "someone in the European Union" of trying to ensure the ceasefire does not hold.

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