

Ukraine's Defense Minister Says Putin Plans to Seize Country

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Ukraine's Defense Minister Stepan Poltorak (R) shakes hands with his Canadian counterpart Jason Kenney in Kiev, Ukraine, June 26, 2015.

KIEV — The West should not drop its guard over Ukraine, the country's defense minister said, adding that a build-up of Russian forces in support of separatists showed President Vladimir Putin was bent on seizing control of the country.

Stepan Poltorak spoke alongside visiting Canadian Defense Minister Jason Kenney on Friday as Kiev military chiefs reported intensified attacks by separatists in the east, despite a cease-fire, with another Ukrainian soldier killed.

"There is a threat still because the military groups of the [separatists] ... and Russian troops continue to build up their forces, bringing additional equipment and ammunition and of course their plans are not peaceful," Poltorak said.

"One should not be naive and think that Putin has given up his plans to seize Ukraine, to destabilize the situation in Ukraine. He's just changing his tactics and strategies, but his goal

remains the same: to seize Ukraine."

Putin denies accusations by Kiev and the West that Russia has provided pro-Russian separatists in east Ukraine with soldiers and weapons.

Although he is often accused of wanting control of Ukraine, he supports a February peace deal under which rebel-held areas of east Ukraine would be given more autonomy from Kiev but remain part of Ukraine.

Poltorak was expected to use Kenney's visit to press for the U.S.-led NATO alliance to provide further military assistance to shore up Kiev's forces in a conflict in which more than 6,400 people have been killed, according to UN estimates.

Canada, like many other NATO members, has provided the ex-Soviet republic only with non-lethal aid. Canadian military trainers are also expected to run programs for new Ukrainian conscripts inside Ukraine this summer.

Government forces and the Russian-backed separatists have accused each other of truce violations since February's deal, brokered by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France.

Poltorak, in his remarks on Friday, accused the separatists of carrying out 5,000 shelling attacks on government positions since the deal was signed in Minsk, Belarus.

Separately on Friday Kiev military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said that one Ukrainian soldier had been killed in separatist rocket and artillery attacks since Thursday.

"The intensity of attacks is growing. They are going on around the clock," he told a briefing, saying hot spots were near the airport of the rebel-held city of Donetsk and at Shyrokyne east of the government-held port city of Mariupol.

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