

Ukrainian Casualties Reported Before Peace Talks

August 03, 2015



An Orthodox priest blesses members of the newly created Ukrainian interior ministry battalion "Saint Maria" during a ceremony before they head to a military training, in front of St. Sophia Cathedral, in Kiev, Ukraine.

KIEV — Four Ukrainian servicemen have been killed and 15 wounded in fighting with pro-Russian rebels in the past 24 hours just before talks on a cease-fire were due to start, the Ukrainian military said on Monday.

It was the highest casualty figure in over two weeks.

Ukrainian military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said separatists were firing heavy weapons banned under a peace agreement and described the situation in western districts of rebel-held Donetsk as the most tense.

There "fighting with occasional tank and artillery fire goes on round-the-clock," he said in a daily military briefing.

Representatives of Ukraine, Russia and rebels prepared to meet in Minsk, Belarus on Monday for further talks on implementing the much-violated cease-fire deal agreed in February.

Twenty-nine Ukrainian servicemen were killed and 175 wounded in separatist eastern territories in July despite the cease-fire, according to a Reuters tally.

On Monday, rebel officials said 22 civilians and rebel fighters and been killed and 29 wounded last month as a result of attacks from the Ukrainian side, separatist press service DAN reported.

They also accused Ukrainian troops of firing heavy weapons.

The meeting in Minsk of the so-called "contact group" involving Ukraine, Russia and the separatists under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was expected to address extending the pull-back of weapons to include tanks and smaller weapons systems.

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