The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

UN Envoy: 'Great Mistake' to Block Aid in Eastern Ukraine

September 29, 2015

Tank crew members of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic take part in a military drill outside the urban settlement of Torez in Donetsk region, Ukraine, Sept. 14.

GENEVA — Efforts by Russia-backed separatist rebels to block "desperately needed" humanitarian aid from reaching people in conflict-ridden eastern Ukraine could amount to crimes against humanity, a top UN human rights official said Tuesday.

Ivan Simonovic, the assistant UN secretary-general for human rights, criticized as a "great mistake" the move by rebels who control the eastern city of Luhansk to kick out UN and humanitarian aid agencies — except for the international Red Cross, which has been allowed to continue operations.

"Unfortunately, I do think that currently the military warfare has been transformed into some sort of humanitarian war," Simonovic told reporters in Geneva after visiting rebel-held eastern Ukraine last week. He added "that obstructing provision of desperately needed humanitarian relief in some circumstances may amount not only to violation of law, but also to crimes against humanity."

Russia-backed separatists have been fighting government troops in eastern Ukraine since April 2014, and at least 8,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

Polio cases have turned up in the region, and Simonovic said 90,000 UNICEF polio vaccines are no longer likely to reach children there. Some children don't have access to basic medicines, he said, pointing to a shortage of antiretroviral medicines needed by about 8,000 people in the Donetsk area. UNICEF says Ukraine has had one of the fastest growing HIV epidemics in the world.

Overall, Simonovic said he was encouraged that a so-called beginning of school season cease-fire since Sept. 1 appeared to be holding, and sees a "window of opportunity" between the two sides.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, blamed the separatists for "a further worsening" of the humanitarian situation in the conflict region as winter approaches. He said Germany is urging Russia to use "its not-inconsiderable influence on the separatists" to ensure access for humanitarian organizations as foreseen in a peace deal struck in Minsk, Belarus, whose terms haven't been applied fully.

Merkel will meet the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and France in Paris on Friday to discuss the conflict in Ukraine, and Simonovic said he hoped that the so-called Normandy group meeting would make progress toward easing the humanitarian situation.

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