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2 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed in Clashes with Separatists

By AFP

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Ukraine has been fighting separatists backed by Russia in the eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions in Donbass since 2014. **Vitali Komar / AP / TASS**

Two Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in clashes with Russian-backed separatists, the military said Friday, testing a ceasefire brokered last year that had brought relative calm to the simmering conflict.

Ukraine has been fighting separatists backed by Russia in the eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions since 2014 following Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula.

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The conflict was at the center of a diplomatic spat at the United Nations on Thursday when Western countries claimed that Russia was blocking efforts to end the fighting.

Ukraine's defense ministry said one soldier was killed Thursday by heavy machine gun fire near the village of Novomykhaylivka southwest of Donetsk, the separatists' de facto capital.

In a separate incident the same day, another soldier was shot dead by sniper fire near Zaytseve, also in the Donetsk region, the ministry said on its website.

The announcement brings to nine the number of servicemen killed since Kiev agreed a ceasefire with the breakaway regions in July last year.

Kiev has repeatedly accused Moscow and the separatists of undermining the truce, and on Thursday President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said during a visit to the frontline that separatist attacks had increased recently.

"We understand that in general, it's only our side that thinks the ceasefire is necessary," Zelensky said during the visit, which included diplomats from several Western countries.

"We understand that in general the separatists want to disrupt it," he added.

The fierce fighting that erupted after Moscow's takeover of Crimea has claimed more than 13,000 lives, according to the UN, but the number of new fatalities has been decreasing in recent years.

Zelenskiy's office said 50 Ukrainian soldiers were killed in 2020, exactly half as many as the year before.

The United States and European countries on Thursday accused Russia of blocking any solution to the conflict.

"We call on Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine, cease its support for its proxies and other armed groups," U.S. diplomat Rodney Hunter said during a UN Security Council video conference.

Russia denies sending troops and arms to support the separatists.

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