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Ukrainian Soldier Killed in War-Torn Separatist East

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Valentin Sprinchak / TASS

A Ukrainian soldier has been killed in clashes with Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's war-torn east, its military said Thursday, raising fears over a fresh outbreak of heavy fighting.

Clashes have broken out in the east over the past month, testing a ceasefire brokered last year that had raised hopes for an end to the conflict that erupted in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea.

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Ukraine's defense ministry reported that small arms fire killed the soldier near the village of Starognativka south of Donetsk, the separatists' de facto capital.

Kiev and its Western allies accuse Russia of sending troops and arms to support the

separatists, claims Moscow denies.

The halt to fighting agreed last July raised hopes for a resolution to the bitter trench war.

But nine Ukrainian servicemen have now been killed since mid-February as Kiev accuses Moscow and separatists of using banned military hardware.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy this week called for a summit with European countries and floated a direct meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin to temper fresh fighting.

But on Thursday Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow had not received a proposal for a meeting between the two presidents and was not aware of a new plan for peace talks.

Russia, Germany and France comprise the Normandy format, a talking shop intended to help resolve the conflict, that last met in 2019 shortly after Zelenskiy was elected.

The fighting has claimed more than 13,000 lives since 2014, according to the United Nations, but the number of deaths has fallen in recent years.

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