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Fresh Shelling Breaks Out in Eastern Ukraine as U.S. Accuses Russia of Invasion 'Pretext'

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@ArmedForcesUkr / twitter

Pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine and Ukrainian government forces accused each other Thursday of opening fire at each other's territory, as the U.S. said Russia is attempting to create a "pretext" for invading Ukraine with claims of "genocide" in the region.

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has been observing the situation in eastern Ukraine, recorded numerous shelling incidents along the line of contact in Donbas on Thursday morning, a diplomatic source told Reuters.

"The situation on the line of contact has sharply escalated. The enemy is making attempts to unleash active hostilities," a message posted on the official self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR)'s Telegram channel said.

Ukraine denied the separatists' accusations that government troops had attacked and instead

said the Russian-backed rebels have shelled a kindergarten in the Ukrainian-controlled town of Stanytsia Luhanska, injuring two teachers.

"Ukrainian Stanytsia Luhanska village was shelled with heavy weapons from the occupied territory of the Donbas. Civilian infrastructure damaged. We call on all partners to swiftly condemn this severe violation of Minsk agreements by Russia amid an already tense security situation.," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted.

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the allegation of a Ukrainian escalation as "disturbing."

"This is a matter of very deep concern," he said.

"We hope that our opponents from Western capitals, from Washington, from NATO, will use all their influence to warn the Kyiv authorities against further escalation."

The flare-up in fighting comes as the Kremlin renews its push to draw attention to what it perceives as discrimination of the local population in the Donbas by the Ukrainian side.

On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Kyiv was committing "genocide" in Donbas while Russian media aired a number of programs purportedly showing secret mass graves in the region and the potential of the Ukrainian forces to use chemical weapons against the people of Donbas.

The U.S. has warned that Russian officials were using inflammatory statements as a “pretext” for a potential invasion into Ukraine.

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“Over the past several weeks, we've also seen Russian officials and Russian media plant numerous stories in the press, any one of which could be elevated to serve as a pretext for an invasion,” State Department Spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday.

"These are false narratives that Russia is developing for use as a pretext for military action against Ukraine."

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki also rejected Russian claims of a “genocide” in the Donbas.

"We're in the window where we believe an attack could come at any time, and that would be preceded by a fabricated pretext," she said, referring to "fake videos, false accusations about chemical weapons or accounts of attacks on Russian soldiers that have not actually occurred."

On Thursday, a senior U.S. official also said that evidence on the ground suggested "Russia is moving toward an imminent invasion" of Ukraine.

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Russia's State Duma on Tuesday backed a resolution calling for diplomatic recognition of Eastern Ukraine's pro-Russian Donbas People's Republics, sending the parliament's motion directly to Putin for consideration. Putin indicated he had no immediate plans to sign the motion, urging Ukraine to abide by the Minsk agreements, a stalled ceasefire agreement signed in 2015.

The Kremlin this week indicated its willingness to find a diplomatic solution to the escalating standoff with the West and has announced the withdrawal of some troops massed near Ukraine and on the annexed Crimean peninsula.

On Thursday, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko also said that Russian troops currently in Belarus for large-scale joint drills will go back after the exercises end later this week.

"The exercises are about to finish. It is time to calm down, the troops will go back to their permanent bases," Grushko said.

However, the West and Ukraine have remained skeptical of the country's willingness to de-escalate.

A senior White House official said Russia has increased its presence on the border with Ukraine by "as many as 7,000 troops," some of whom Washington said arrived Wednesday.

AFP contributed reporting.

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