

Minsk cease-fire verging on collapse as fighting continues in east Ukraine

By Niles Williamson
18 February 2015

Fighting escalated in the eastern Ukrainian city of Debaltseve on Tuesday, as the cease-fire negotiated last week in Minsk has failed to take hold.

There was street-to-street fighting in Debaltseve, as pro-Russian separatist militias moved to consolidate control over the city, where at least 5,000 Ukrainian troops are trapped. The separatists aim to reinforce their strategic position by seizing the city—a key rail hub connecting the rebel-controlled cities of Donetsk and Luhansk—from the NATO-backed Kiev regime.

Eduard Basurin, spokesman for the Donetsk People's Republic's (DPR) Defense Ministry, told reporters that the separatists controlled “eighty percent” of Debaltseve on Tuesday.

Ukraine's Defense Ministry reported that a group of soldiers had been ambushed and taken prisoner by the pro-Russian separatists. While Kiev did not confirm how many were captured, separatists claimed that they had captured as many as 300 soldiers.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko phoned German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Tuesday and denounced the separatists' attempt to consolidate control over Debaltseve as a “cynical attack” on the cease-fire agreement. In the same call, he reportedly appealed to the UN Security Council to “prevent further violations...and full-scale military operations in the heart of Europe.”

Separatist leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko said over the weekend that the rebels do not consider Debaltseve to be covered by the terms of the cease-fire and called on the encircled Ukrainian forces to lay down their weapons and surrender. “Any attempt of the Ukrainian armed forces to unblock Debaltseve will be regarded as a violation of the Minsk agreements; such attempts will be suppressed, adversaries will be eliminated,” Zakharchenko said.

In another sign that the Minsk agreement is breaking down, both sides stated that they would not remove heavy weapons, including artillery, from the front lines as long as the other side continued fighting. Last week's agreement stipulated the pull back of all heavy equipment from the front lines beginning Tuesday, two days after the cease-fire went into effect.

Ukrainian military spokesman Andriy Lysenko bluntly stated that “there is no ceasefire, and so there is no precondition for a pull-back of heavy weapons.”

Separatist leaders also announced they would not begin to pull back heavy equipment until the Kiev regime did the same. “We will not do anything unilaterally. That would make our soldiers targets,” Denis Pushilin stated.

The continuing fighting makes clear that the recent Minsk agreement has done nothing to end the bloody proxy war being waged between NATO and Russia in eastern Ukraine, or the danger that this conflict could escalate into total war between NATO and Russia, a nuclear-armed power.

Tensions remain extremely high. This is above all because Washington, which triggered the conflict by installing a right-wing regime in Kiev last February through a fascist-led putsch, has made clear that it intends to continue escalating the conflict.

The Minsk deal was negotiated between the governments of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine, amid fears that US plans to directly arm the Kiev regime could trigger continent-wide war throughout Europe.

On Tuesday, State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters that the Obama administration was still prepared to arm the Ukrainian regime with lethal military equipment. “We certainly believe that a diplomatic approach and a political approach is the

right approach here, but the same options that were on the table a week ago or two weeks ago remain on the table,” she told reporters.

If Washington has not yet openly repudiated the Minsk deal, this is largely because the military situation facing the pro-Kiev regime forces in eastern Ukraine is desperate. After the last failed Ukraine ceasefire, also negotiated in Minsk last September, the Kiev regime refused to remove its troops and artillery from positions in the east, and fighting continued.

Kiev is again responding to the Minsk agreement by trying to buy time on the ground and strengthen itself in preparation for a renewed offensive against the separatists. On Tuesday, Poroshenko authorized a timetable through the end of the year for the call-up of men up to the age of 27.

Tensions between Russia and the United States are also escalating, as Moscow and Washington trade accusations that they are arming their proxies in Ukraine in violation of the cease-fire.

Speaking after a meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban on Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the Western powers of supplying the Kiev regime with arms. “According to our data, weapons are already being supplied [to Kiev],” he told reporters. “This is not surprising. I am convinced that whoever is supplying the weapons, the number of victims may grow, but the outcome will not change.”

The US State Department released a statement Monday that placed blame on Russia for the continued fighting. It warned that ongoing hostilities between Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatists “threaten the most recent cease-fire and jeopardize the planned withdrawal of heavy weapons.”

The State Department reported that it was “closely monitoring reports of a new column of Russian military equipment moving toward Debaltseve.” The statement concluded by calling on “Russia and the separatists it backs to halt all attacks immediately,” and “fully implement their September 5 and 19 Minsk commitments.”

Continuing its part in escalating political and economic pressure on Russia, the European Union announced new sanctions targeted at those in Russia and Ukraine accused of supporting the separatists. The EU announced on Monday 19 additions to the list of

individuals in Russia and eastern Ukraine subject to asset freezes and travel bans, including Russia’s deputy defense minister.

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