

Conflict Heats Up in Ukraine. Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) Versus the Donbass and Lugansk militias

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The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a statement this February regarding the casualties sustained in the conflict in the eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) and the Donbass and Lugansk militias.

According to the OHCHR there have been 9,167 killed and 21,044 injured since the conflict began in April of 2014. These figures include civilian casualties. There is some skepticism regarding the casualty figures reported by the Armed Forces, with most parties knowledgeable of the fierce fighting that took place prior to the signing of Minsk II believing that the government has hidden the extent of casualties suffered in the battles that led to the Debaltseve encirclement.

Artillery shelling and small arms fire originating from both sides of the Line of Contact has mired the cease-fire agreed upon under Minsk II on an almost daily basis. As recently as the end of February of this year, the OSCE has monitored and reported on the movement of heavy weapons out of storage on the part of the UAF at numerous times in clear violation of Minsk II, as well as the positioning of infantry fighting vehicles within the 15 kilometer exclusion zone on the part of the militias. Civilians of the Donbass have been subjected to indiscriminant artillery bombardment from the UAF on a continuous basis.

On February 23rd, the UAF attacked the DPR town of Spartak in force, with the support of tanks and artillery. They have also continued to bombard the Donetsk airport with artillery, including "Grad" mobile rocket units. The town of Gorlovka and surrounding neighborhoods have been the target of recent bombardment as well. DPR and LPR reconnaissance has noted the movement of artillery, infantry fighting vehicles and tanks in forward areas close to the contact line on the part of the UAF. This is corroborated by OSCE reports of discrepancies in serial numbers of T-64 and T-72 tanks in storage and the wholesale absence of tanks, artillery and other heavy equipment at UAF storage facilities that come under OSCE monitoring under the Minsk II agreement.

There is further evidence that the UFA is planning a possible offensive in the coming spring and summer months. The AFU "Lugansk" unit, as well as elements of the 24th and 28th mechanized brigades are preparing to conduct exercises simulating the capture and occupation of territories of the LPR. These exercises are to take place very close to the line of contact. The reinforcement and strengthening of defensive positions and the movement

of ammunition and supplies to the front line has also been observed.

The tensions between Russia and Turkey that have come out of differing objectives in the Syrian conflict and the downing of the Russian SU-24 last year may now be manifesting in the Ukraine as well. Turkish militants have apparently been working with Crimean Tartars in acts of sabotage directed at the Crimean peninsula. Apparently, the Tartar nationalists that have allied with the Right Sector to enforce an illegal energy and food blockage of Crimea from the Kherson region are receiving material support from the Turkish government. Pictures have appeared that show members of the Turkish "Grey Wolves" with Tartar nationalists in the Kherson area, as well as comments from the Tartar nationalist leader Lenur Islyamov that Turkey has provided him with monetary and material support for the blockade. It is unknown how many Grey Wolves may be operating in Ukraine, but the internal security forces of Crimea are well aware of their presence.

As the government in Kiev continues to lose the support of the people, is mired in charges of corruption, and has proven totally incapable of improving the economic situation of the country, it will most likely resort to a renewal of hostilities in the east. The Poroshenko regime may see no other alternative than to raise the specter of another Russian invasion to retain their hold on power as the domestic situation continues to deteriorate. A renewed offensive against the DPR and LPR and military actions against Crimea, including terrorist operations by Tartar nationalist assisted by Turkish extremists, may well be planned for the summer months as the Ukraine continues to slide towards bankruptcy and the Ukrainian government continues to lose legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of its citizens.

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