

February Cease-fire Collapses as Fighting Re-erupts in Eastern Ukraine

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Renewed fighting broke out Wednesday between Ukrainian government forces and Russian-backed separatists around the rebel-held city of Donetsk. The fighting reported in Maryinka and Krsnohorivka, a few miles west of Donetsk in government-controlled territory, was the most serious between the two sides since a cease-fire which came into effect in February.

Vladimir Kononov, a spokesman for the rebel Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), blamed government forces for initiating the fighting. "The Ukrainian side has carried out a provocation and started shelling our positions all along the front," he told reporters.

"This is Kiev's local provocation, an attempt to break deep into the DPR from Maryinka. All of this is local, not large-scale combat clashes," separatist deputy defense minister Eduard Basurin told Interfax. However, Vyacheslav Abroskin, chief of the Donetsk province's police force loyal to Kiev, told AFP that the cities of Maryinka and Georgiivka were the site of "intense shooting."

The Russian-backed separatists have accused government forces of repeatedly firing mortars from Maryinka into the city of Donetsk since February. At least 15 people were killed Wednesday after government forces shelled rebel-held areas.

Kremlin spokesman Dimitry Peskov also blamed Kiev for the renewed fighting. "In Moscow, we are following very closely, and are deeply concerned by, the provocative actions by the Ukrainian armed forces that are, as far as we can see, provoking the situation," he told reporters.

The Ukrainian army general staff blamed the pro-Russian forces, however, reporting that the separatists had launched an offensive against government positions with as many as a dozen tanks and a thousand fighters. Ukrainian government spokesman Yuri Biryukov reported that two people had been killed and at least 30 wounded in the offensive.

US State Department spokesperson Marie Harf told reporters on Wednesday that Russia was to blame for the latest round of fighting and threatened retaliation. "Russia bears direct responsibility for preventing these attacks and implementing a ceasefire. Any attempts to seize additional Ukrainian territory will be met with increased costs," she stated.

In fact, responsibility for the bloodshed in eastern Ukraine lies squarely with Washington and its imperialist allies in Europe. Fighting broke out last year after Ukraine's right-wing government, brought to power in a fascist-led coup backed by Washington and Berlin, launched a military offensive aiming to crush pro-Russian protests. As of June 1, the UN

estimates that more than 6,400 people have been killed in the fighting and more than 1.5 million people displaced.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French Prime Minister François Hollande scrambled to arrange a cease-fire this winter, after the separatists received Russian backing and began to make significant advances against government forces. The United States then threatened to escalate the conflict by openly arming the Ukrainian regime with \$3 billion worth of military equipment, including anti-tank missiles, drones, and armored Humvees. As Hollande noted, this raised the prospect of “total war” with Russia.

The renewed fighting in the east comes after a recent series of actions by the US and Ukrainian governments aimed at provoking the separatists and pressuring Russia.

While the US has postponed the delivery of lethal military equipment to Ukraine, it initiated a program to train four companies of the Ukrainian National Guard, which has incorporated members of fascistic militias such as the Azov Battalion and Right Sector. Approximately 300 US paratroopers deployed to a military base in Yavoriv in Western Ukraine in April. At least 200 troops from Canada and 75 from the United Kingdom have also been deployed to Ukraine to support the US training program.

On Saturday, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko provocatively granted citizenship to former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and appointed him as the governor of Odessa province in the country’s southwest. He was a prominent supporter of the right-wing coup that ousted Ukraine’s pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich last year.

Saakashvili started a war in 2008 with Russia as Georgian president, launching an attack on Russian peacekeepers in the disputed Georgian province of South Ossetia. He is wanted on multiple criminal charges in Georgia for the violent suppression of popular protests in 2007.

The city of Odessa was the site of a gruesome massacre of pro-Russian protesters last year. Several hundred far-right supporters of the Western-backed regime in Kiev assaulted a pro-Russian protest in on May 2, 2014 driving them into the city’s trade union hall. The building was besieged by gunfire and set alight with Molotov cocktails, killing 42 people and injuring 170.

The province also borders the disputed Moldovan territory of Transnistria, a possible flashpoint where Russia has stationed peacekeepers since 1992, when a cease-fire was negotiated between the government of Moldova and Transnistrian separatists.

The Ukrainian parliament recently suspended military cooperation agreements that gave Russia the right to transit Ukrainian territory in order to rotate and resupply the approximately 1,500 troops stationed there. Russian soldiers must now travel through Moldova, which has begun arresting and deporting Russian soldiers who do not belong to the peacekeeping force and who do not provide the government with a months’ notice of their travel plans.

In yet another provocative move, the Ukrainian government approved a series of laws in April legitimizing Nazi collaborationist forces which carried out ethnic mass murder during WWII. The Nazi-collaborationist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army have been rehabilitated, with the law stipulating that surviving members and their families must be provided with social benefits.

At the same time, the Ukrainian government also approved laws which outlaw the display of the Nazi swastika as well as communist symbols and parties which espouse communist ideology. The display of the swastika has had little effect as most of the fascist groups in Ukraine display alternate neo-Nazi symbols, such as the wolfsangel used by the Azov Battalion. Meanwhile, hundreds of statues and place names recognizing Soviet-era Communist leaders and officials are being expunged with state funding.

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