

Poroshenko launches Bloody Assault on Eastern Ukraine

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Ukrainian forces have launched a series of bloody attacks in the eastern regions following the declared end Monday of a ten-day ceasefire by President Petro Poroshenko. The nominal ceasefire was never truly operational.

Heavy fighting and artillery bombardments were reported around the rebel-controlled cities of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, beginning at 19:30 Monday. Grad rockets were also fired at the city of Karlovka.

Igor Strelkov, the Russian commander of rebels in Slavyansk, said that many civilians had been wounded when government forces shelled several villages around the city.

At least four people were killed and five more wounded after a passenger bus came under fire in Ukraine's Donetsk region Tuesday morning.

Russia protested the death Monday night of a Russian journalist, Anatoly Klyan, a cameraman for state-owned Channel One, who was shot in the stomach by Ukrainian forces on a bus carrying journalists and soldiers' mothers.

Yesterday, Ukraine's parliament speaker, Oleksandr V. Turchynov, declared, "The active phase of the counterterrorism operation resumed in the morning... Our armed forces are striking the bases and strongholds of the terrorists."

Parliament was prepared to consider a request by Poroshenko for the imposition of a state of emergency in the east after he declared in a televised address midnight that Ukrainian forces would "attack and liberate our land... Termination of ceasefire is our response to terrorists, insurgents, marauders... Armed Forces, the National Guard, the State Border Service, the Security Service received appropriate orders."

Poroshenko blamed the pro-Russian rebels in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions for failing to honour the ceasefire and denounced the government of Vladimir Putin in Moscow for allegedly failing to rein them in.

Militants had failed to take up a "unique opportunity" to support his peace plan, Poroshenko said, and had violated the ceasefire more than 100 times.

Later, in chilling, fascistic language on his Facebook page, Poroshenko declared that "we must be united, because we are fighting to free our land from dirt and parasites."

In reply to Poroshenko's claims, Kostyantyn Knyrik, a spokesman for the Donetsk People's Republic, told the Interfax news agency that government forces had never adhered to a truce. "After Kiev declared its so-called ceasefire, strikes conducted by Ukrainian servicemen against Slovyansk and Semenivka did not stop for a day," he said, adding that officials of the self-proclaimed republic had documented 200 violations.

"As a matter of fact, there was no ceasefire there," he said. "The decision not to extend the ceasefire will not significantly impact military operations."

Russia has demanded an investigation into claims that chemical and phosphorus weapons have been used by Ukrainian troops. People showing symptoms of chlorine poisoning were admitted to hospital following an alleged attack carried out by Ukrainian Special Forces near Slavyansk, according to separatist forces. Earlier, there were accusations of phosphorus firebombs being dropped on villages in southeastern Ukraine, accompanied by video footage.

Poroshenko's assertion that Putin had not done enough to prove he was ready to support a ceasefire came despite the Russian parliament's cancellation of an order allowing him to send troops to Ukraine to defend Russian citizens.

More significant still was the proposal made during teleconference negotiations Monday that included German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande for border checkpoints on the Russian side to be monitored by representatives of the Ukrainian Border Service as well as observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) so as to ensure that no crossing points were being used for illegal purposes.

That day, Hollande's office announced agreement between Putin and Poroshenko on the proposal, which was a key element of the Ukrainian president's "peace plan." The two had also agreed to work on the liberation of more hostages and prisoners and the organisation of "substantial tripartite negotiations," Hollande's office said.

Poroshenko then rang US Secretary of State John Kerry, who likely told him the ruse of a ceasefire should no longer be maintained—especially given the reluctance of the European powers to impose new sanctions on Russia.

Putin has now pledged that Russia will "energetically defend the right of ethnic Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire arsenal of available means", including "the right to self-defence."

Moscow has been taking pains to identify the Obama administration as the major force stirring up tensions in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. This is, in part, an attempt to exploit divisions between Washington and the European powers over the economic and political impact of a full-scale conflict with Russia.

But there is no doubt that the US is prepared to go much further and faster than its European allies.

On Saturday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave a televised interview in which he said that "our American colleagues still prefer to push the Ukrainian leadership toward a confrontational path," and that the chances of settling the crisis would have been better if they depended only on Russia and Europe.

Putin struck a similar note Tuesday. Addressing Russian diplomats in Moscow, he said: “We failed—when I say ‘we,’ I mean my colleagues in Europe and myself—we failed to convince [Poroshenko] that the road to a secure, stable and inviolable peace cannot lie through war.”

He added, “Our relationship with the United States is not the best at the moment. We have always tried to be predictable partners, handle business on an equal basis, but in return our legal interests were partially ignored and are still ignored.”

Russia was obliged to annex Ukraine’s Crimea region in March to prevent NATO forces entering, which would have created “a completely different alignment of forces,” he said. “I would like to stress that what happened in Ukraine was the climax of the negative tendencies in international affairs that had been building up for years.”

On Monday, US Air Force General Philip M. Breedlove, NATO’s supreme allied commander for Europe and commander of US European Command, issued another bellicose denunciation of Russia. “Russian irregular forces are very active inside eastern Ukraine and Russian financing is very active inside eastern Ukraine,” Breedlove said.

Offering no evidence, he continued, “We see in training on the [Russian] side of the border is big equipment, tanks, anti-aircraft capability, and now we see those capabilities being used on the [Ukrainian] side of the border.”

Asked how many Russian troops have massed on the Ukraine border, Breedlove responded that there are “seven-plus battalion task groups on the east side of that border,” equivalent to 50,000 troops.

Breedlove’s anti-Russian rhetoric framed his announcement that troops will be dispatched from the US to Europe, starting in October, to buttress forces that have already been moved from Germany, Italy and elsewhere in Europe to mount additional ground and air patrols in the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, as well as in Poland and Romania.

Breedlove urged Congress to reconsider any reductions in the number of troops in Europe and to approve \$1 billion in additional military funding, because the US “may need to add additional rotational troops to cover the sustained, persistent presence that we are now envisioning.”

The US is urging all 28 NATO member states to reverse their own defence cuts and honour the military alliance’s commitment to spend a minimum of two percent of gross domestic product on defence—which presently is only met by the US, Britain, Greece and Estonia.

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