

Ukraine Regime Claims Control of Key Port City

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The US-backed right-wing regime in Ukraine claimed Friday to have won control of the city of Mariupol, the country's main port on the Sea of Azov and the largest urban area in eastern Ukraine that the government has been able to win back from pro-Russian separatist forces.

Interior Minister Arseny Avakov said forces loyal to the government in Kiev had raised the Ukrainian flag of the city hall. Newly inaugurated President Petro Poroshenko gave orders for Mariupol to become the temporary capital for the region, replacing the city of Donetsk, where rebel forces remain in control.

Pro-Russian forces control the bulk of two regions in eastern Ukraine, Luhansk and Donetsk, where about 14 percent of Ukraine's population lives. Mariupol, a city of 500,000, is at the southwestern edge of the Donetsk region. It is half the size of the city of Donetsk, the longtime capital of the region.

Mariupol has been the scene of repeated shifts in control of key buildings, including the city hall. One month ago, fighting in the center of the city claimed 21 lives.

Avakov claimed that "high casualties" had been inflicted on opposition forces in the city, which he described as "terrorists from the Donetsk People's Republic," including supposed Chechen gunmen. Subsequent reports indicated that seven people were killed in fighting that extended over a six-hour period and left buildings in the downtown area riddled with bullets.

Popular opinion in the city remains overwhelmingly opposed to the US-backed regime in Kiev. The British Broadcasting Corporation reported "civilians gathered in the town centre on Friday to protest against the government's attack on rebels, shouting obscenities at passing Ukrainian soldiers."

"The government brought everything here, including a cannon," Andrei Nikidimovich, aged 52, told the BBC. "People were not allowed to come and witness how the government was shooting its own citizens."

Other fighting was reported near a military base in the town of Artemivsk, near Kramatorsk, and outside Slovyansk, a city in the northern part of the Donetsk region that has been one of the main targets of pro-Kiev troop movements.

Earlier in the week, Avakov announced that the government would deploy police officers from central and western Ukraine to the east and would fire anyone who refused to take part in the suppression of the eastern rebellion. Both policemen and prison guards in

eastern Ukraine have been quitting their positions, either to join the rebels or because they did not want to obey orders from Kiev to fire on their own people.

Both Kiev and Washington sought to exacerbate tensions with Russia on Thursday, claiming that three tanks had crossed the border from Russia into the Luhansk region of Ukraine, along the section of the border controlled by the rebel forces. The US State Department issued a statement warning that the entry of Russian tanks would mark a significant escalation of the conflict.

Within 24 hours, however, this report was exposed as war propaganda. Observers reported that the tanks were not T-72s, the standard Russian tank, but T-64s, an older model manufactured in Ukraine. The anti-Kiev insurgents confirmed that they had obtained possession of the three tanks, a significant addition to their arsenal, adding, "We got them from a military warehouse."

The State Department sought to cover its tracks, issuing a further statement effectively conceding that the tanks were T-64s, while claiming that they were from a Russian stockpile of older vehicles, and had been turned over to the anti-Kiev insurgents, along with rocket launchers and other military equipment. "This is unacceptable," a US spokeswoman said.

The only actual case of border crossing by an armored vehicle came Thursday night when a Ukrainian armored troop carrier entered the town of Millerovo in the Rostov region of southern Russia. The vehicle then reportedly broke down and the soldiers operating it fled back across the border. Russian border guards then took possession of it.

There was another attempt on the life of Denis Pushilin, a leader of the Donetsk People's Republic, when a car bomb destroyed a minibus belonging to him Thursday night, killing two people and wounding as many as five more. Pushilin was not with the vehicle, however, and was not injured.

Despite increasingly belligerent statements from Kiev against the anti-regime forces in the east, there has been little change in the position on the ground, and the US-backed government has so far been unable follow up its threats with major military moves.

Meanwhile the Russian government of President Vladimir Putin continues to back away from the rebellion in east Ukraine and seek a deal with Kiev. The foreign ministers of Germany, Poland and Russia met in St. Petersburg Tuesday to discuss a proposed ceasefire in the east.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov welcomed a proposal by Poroshenko for "humanitarian corridors" to allow civilians to leave areas where there is active fighting. He said later that the Russian government did not support sending peacekeeping forces into eastern Ukraine because "we don't think that the situation has gone that far."

Talks over Russian supplies of natural gas to Ukraine have been stalled by a dispute over the cost, after Moscow demanded Ukraine pay the market price charged to other European countries. Gazprom had provided gas at \$285.50 per 1,000 cubic meters, a \$200 discount off the market price, in a deal negotiated with the pro-Russian Yanukovich government that was overthrown by the US-backed right-wing coup in February.

Gazprom Chief Executive Alexei Miller offered Ukraine a lesser discount of \$100 per 1,000 cubic feet, but Kiev rejected that offer. In a statement to the Russian news service Interfax,

Putin complained, "Ukraine sees the discount as insufficient and insists on a bigger one; it's not clear why." He added, "We think that our proposals are more than just partnership and are aimed at supporting the Ukrainian economy in this difficult time."

The deadline for a new gas deal has been pushed back to Monday, June 16, but Miller said there would be no further extension. Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said the government was preparing for a possible cutoff of gas supplies from Russia on that date. Ukraine currently owes Russia \$4 billion for previously supplied gas.

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