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By Michael Holtz

Kiev, rebels both claim gains on eve of Ukraine peace talks

I Київ, і повстанці заявляють про успіхи напередодні українських мирних переговорів

Українські військові повідомили, що вони витіснили повстанців з декількох сіл на північний схід від Маріуполя. Одночасно повстанці заявили, що оточили Дебальцеве. Запеклі бойові дії підвищують ставки на мирних переговорах у середу.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/terrorism-security/2015/0210/Kiev-rebels-both-claim-gains-on-eve-of-Ukraine-peace-talks>

Government forces and Russian-backed rebels both claim to have made gains in eastern Ukraine this week, as the fighting rages on a day ahead of urgent peace talks.

The Ukrainian military announced that it has driven out rebels from several villages northeast of the strategic port of Mariupol, pushing them closer to the border with Russia. Meanwhile, the rebels say they have encircled the town of Debaltseve. The key transportation hub has been the focus of intense fighting for more than a week.

While each side disputes the other's claims of advance, there is no doubt that the violence gripping eastern Ukraine has heightened in recent weeks. The intense fighting, which the United Nations says has killed more than 5,300 people since April 2014, raises the stakes for the peace talks that are expected to take place Wednesday.

Col. Andriy Lysenko, a spokesman for Ukraine's military, said the rebels' ongoing assault on Debaltseve was an attempt to gain leverage over Kiev in peace negotiations, The Wall Street Journal reports.

"The political aim of capturing the bridgehead of Debaltseve is the desire of the militants' Russian curators to force Ukraine to make concessions to the bandits and sign a truce with them on the Kremlin's conditions," he said Monday.

On Monday, Colonel Lysenko said about 1,500 Russian troops had crossed the border into Ukraine via rebel-controlled border posts over the weekend. Moscow has long denied sending troops to aid the rebels.

The uptick in violence in eastern Ukraine raises the pressure on President Obama to agree to supply the Ukrainian military with lethal defense weapons.

At a joint news conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel Monday, it became clear that the president has yet to make a decision. But he acknowledged that he was considering the option, the Associated Press reports. He said he had ordered his team to look into "whether there are additional things we can do to help Ukraine bolster its defenses in the face of Russian aggression."

For now, both leaders' hopes are pinned on reaching a diplomatic resolution to the conflict – no matter how much of long shot it may be.

"It has always proved to be right to try again and again to sort such a conflict," Chancellor Merkel said Monday, reaffirming her commitment to diplomatic negotiations.

The Kremlin has warned the West ahead of the talks against sending weapons to Ukraine or imposing new sanctions on Russia. If the US sent lethal military equipment to Kiev, "Russia would reasonably consider the US to be a direct participant in the conflict," Evgeny Buzhinsky, a military expert at the Moscow-based PIR Center, told The Moscow Times.

Speaking to The Moscow Times on a condition of anonymity, a member of the Russian Defense Ministry's public advisory board warned that Moscow would not only up the ante in eastern Ukraine, "but also respond asymmetrically against Washington or its allies on other fronts."

Representatives from Ukraine, Russia, the rebels, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are meeting Tuesday to lay the groundwork for the formal negotiations. The leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France are to meet for the formal negotiations Wednesday in Minsk, Belarus.

The detailed peace proposals have not been released but the plan is thought to include a demilitarized zone of 30 to 45 miles around the current front line, the BBC reports.