

Government military offensive in eastern Ukraine continues

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The week-long “unilateral ceasefire” announced by Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko is already being exposed as a fraud. Since it was declared operational Friday at 10 p.m. local time, Ukraine’s armed forces have continued what they describe as an “anti-terrorist” operation in eastern Ukraine against pro-Russian separatists opposed to the Kiev regime installed by the Western powers.

Poroshenko assumed power June 7 following a ballot in which only 54 percent of Ukrainians participated, with large parts of the east boycotting the election. He has advanced what he calls a 15-point peace plan, offering decentralisation of power, early elections, a 10-kilometre buffer zone on the Ukrainian-Russian border, and a supposed amnesty to separatists.

However, an Interior Ministry statement made clear that this was little more than an ultimatum to anti-Kiev forces to surrender. The statement declared: “This is being done to allow terrorists to lay down their arms. Those who do not do this will be destroyed.”

On Thursday, the day before the ceasefire was to begin, intense fighting occurred near Krasnyi Liman, east of Slavyansk. A government spokesman boasted that 200 rebels were killed and hundreds more wounded.

Igor Strelkov, commander of the Donbas People’s Militia, said his men were far outnumbered and outgunned and would probably retreat from their positions in the area. Appealing for aid from Russian President Vladimir Putin, he said, “I hope that they have enough conscience left in Moscow to take some measures.”

On Saturday, Pavel Gubarev, the self-proclaimed governor of the Donetsk People’s Republic, said there was no ceasefire near Slavyansk. “There is shooting all the time, and this ceasefire that Poroshenko is talking about is just fake. The Ukrainian forces are either not under his control, or he is just a liar.”

Alexander Borodai, the prime minister of the Donetsk

People’s Republic, added: “Since last evening, combat activities are continuing. Poroshenko’s artillery is bombing Slavyansk and the air force has made several raids. Words about a ceasefire as always were just that--words.”

Moscow said Saturday that a Russian customs officer was hit by a bullet when Ukrainian soldiers fired shots from the other side of the border. The Russian Foreign Ministry called the incident a “direct provocation,” adding, “How does this square with the cessation of hostilities announced by Kiev today?”

While the government military offensive continues, the Western media is dutifully reporting that counter-attacks by pro-Russian forces are to blame for undermining the ceasefire. This is despite the fact that a Kiev spokesman, Vladyslav Seleznyov, said, “In all these episodes, the attacks of the fighters were deflected” without loss of life except amongst the rebels.

At the same time, US and NATO threats against Russia are being stepped up. On Thursday, NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen spoke at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, the UK’s premier military think tank. He asserted that Russia was redeploying “at least a few thousand more” troops to its border with Ukraine.

“The international community would have to respond firmly if Russia were to intervene further,” he threatened. “Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is an attempt to rewrite international rules and recreate a sphere of influence.”

The next day, the United States accused Russia of preparing “additional tanks for departure” and accumulating “artillery at a deployment site in southwest Russia.” Russian forces on the border were now “the closest they’ve been since the invasion of Crimea” in March, an official claimed.

A Ukrainian government spokesman alleged that

“numerous facts confirm weapons and military equipment are being supplied to the terrorists” by Russia.

In a weekend interview, Rasmussen described the upcoming NATO summit in Wales, set for September, as taking place under conditions where Russia’s “illegal military actions” in Ukraine had “dramatically changed” Europe’s security.

NATO had conducted “exercises on the ground” in the Baltic states, he said, “and we will not hesitate to take further steps if necessary to ensure continued effective defence and protection of our allies.” He continued, “We have tried to develop a partnership with Russia, but apparently Russia considers us not a partner but an adversary and, of course, we have to adapt to that.”

The US is also leading a push for more severe sanctions against Russia, to be discussed at a European Union summit in Brussels this week. Germany, France and the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have all made supportive noises in an attempt to counter fears of a high economic cost and a threat to gas supplies from Russia, which account for a third of European consumption. European Commission president José Manuel Barroso told a news conference, “I am pleading for a common position of the member states.”

Moscow, anxious to stabilise its economic and political relations with the West and placate its backers among Russia’s oligarchs, continues to seek some form of accommodation with the US, EU and NATO. But it has been forced to take defensive measures, nevertheless.

On Friday, the Kremlin issued a fairly unambiguous denunciation of Poroshenko’s ceasefire, stating, “This is not an invitation to peace and negotiations, but an ultimatum to militias in southeastern Ukraine to lay down their arms.”

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said, “It is disturbing and raises concerns that, simultaneously with this [ceasefire] announcement...the so-called anti-terrorist operation is increasing.”

However, on Saturday, Putin issued a far more conciliatory statement, supporting Poroshenko’s ceasefire “as well as his stated intentions to take a number of concrete steps to achieve a peaceful settlement.” Putin urged “meaningful negotiations and political compromise between the opposing sides in eastern Ukraine.”

Military tensions continue to escalate. On June 19, reports appeared of a large-scale NATO military exercise in the Baltic Sea involving 30 ships. Rear Admiral Rick Synder, on board the USS Mount Whitney, told the press, “Russia has participated in the past and she was invited

[this year] and then that invitation was rescinded by the United States after the events in Crimea and the Ukraine.”

The Mount Whitney is the command and control ship for the 42nd annual BALTOPS exercise, described as intended to “enhance multinational maritime capabilities and interoperability, and improve involvement in the larger Baltic region Theatre Security Cooperation (TSC) strategy.” The exercise involves 14 countries.

Russia has denied any major redeployment of forces to its border with Ukraine. A statement issued Friday by Yuri Ushakov, Putin’s foreign policy adviser, said Russia was concerned about security, but “It is just the border guards that are getting some reinforcements, and troops have been withdrawn.”

But on June 21, RT, a pro-Kremlin media outlet, ran a major story headlined “Putin Orders Surprise Drills to Check Combat Readiness of Central Russia Forces.” It stated: “All Russian forces in Siberia, the Urals and beyond have been put on combat-ready alert, Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu said after President Putin ordered surprise drills.

“Over 65,000 of Russia’s troops in the Central Military District have been put on alert to verify troops’ combat-readiness during massive war games of all branches of the armed forces. The exercises involve the relocation of military personnel and hardware, firing training and complex inspections.”

All troops of the Central Military District “have been placed in a state of full combat readiness,” said Shoigu, in drills lasting for a week, from June 21 through 28, involving up to 5,500 military vehicles, 180 airplanes and 60 helicopters.

The alert took effect just after Poroshenko’s “ceasefire” was supposed to begin, and was set to end the day after the ceasefire concluded.



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