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By James Marson in Luhanske, Ukraine, and Anton Troianovski in Berlin

## Ukraine Truce Fades in Fight for Key Town

Fighting for Debaltseve reflects hard-held strategic interests on both sides

*Українське перемир'я зникає в боротьбі за ключові міста  
Боротьба за Дебальцеве відображає важкість поєднання стратегічних  
інтересів обох сторін*

*Боротьба за Дебальцеве стала великою проблемою для припинення вогню, яке набрало чинності і повинно було припинити багатомісячний конфлікт між українськими силами та підтримуваних Росією бойовиків на сході України. Сепаратисти за підтримки російських армійських підрозділів намагаються відрізати тисячі українських солдат в місті. Канцлер Німеччини Ангела Меркель охарактеризувала ситуацію в Україні як "крихку" і закликала усі сторони "зробити все, щоб припинити вогонь."*

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-truce-fades-in-fight-for-key-town-1424122730>



*A Ukrainian soldier strikes a victory sign on the road between the towns of Debaltseve and Artemivsk in Ukraine on Monday. Photo: Associated Press*

In the railway town of Debaltseve, Ukraine's cease-fire lasted all of 40 minutes.

"We were surprised when the firing stopped, and hoped it would be the cease-fire," said Albert Sardaryan, a 22-year-old combat paramedic in the town, by telephone. "But then it started again."

Fighting for Debaltseve has become the biggest challenge to the cease-fire that went into effect at midnight Saturday and was supposed to end months of conflict between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed militants in Ukraine's east. A separatist advance supported, according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials, by Russian army units, has all but cut off thousands of Ukrainian soldiers in the town.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Monday described the situation in Ukraine as "fragile" and called on all sides to "do everything to hold this cease-fire." A statement from the U.S. State Department said the U.S. was "gravely concerned by the deteriorating situation in and around Debaltseve." and called "on Russia and the separatists it backs to halt all attacks."

While fighting has subsided along large parts of the front line, both sides warned Monday that the violence around Debaltseve is too intense to begin pulling back heavy weapons, the second step in the truce deal brokered in the Belarusian capital of Minsk by France and Germany.

Officials said at least five Ukrainian soldiers had been killed so far during the truce and accused the Russia-backed rebels of stepping up attacks with artillery, tanks and mortars for a total of 118 strikes. Separatists said they had fired only in response to attacks by Kiev.



Members of the separatist self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic army collect parts of a destroyed Ukrainian tank in the town of Vuhlehirsk, west of Debaltseve, on Monday. Photo: Reuters

The rebels say Debaltseve is theirs and that fighting there doesn't fall under the truce signed Thursday. They say the Ukrainians can leave the town if they put down their weapons, a line reiterated by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday after the talks in Minsk.

Ukraine's government said its forces won't withdraw and the rebels must observe the cease-fire.

Debaltseve, home to around 25,000 before the conflict, is a critical rail and road connection between the main rebel-held cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. A Ukrainian security spokesman, Andriy Lysenko, said Ukraine was determined to hold on, as control of the town by the rebels would allow them to bring in reinforcements quickly and easily to Donetsk.

Western officials have believed for days that Russia and the separatists wanted control of Debaltseve before stopping the fighting. At the marathon peace talks in Minsk that began Wednesday, the Russian side insisted the cease-fire couldn't start any earlier than Sunday—to provide enough time to capture the town, the Europeans believed. Ukraine, France and Germany wanted a much quicker start to the cease-fire, according to people familiar with the talks.

Western officials said the continued fighting could indicate that Mr. Putin favors a simmering conflict—one that he can ignite at any time to impede Ukraine's attempts to integrate westward.

A separatist official said Monday that the militants would consider the truce void if Ukraine made any moves toward the North Atlantic Treaty Association.

Despite ongoing fighting, Kremlin foreign-policy aide Yuri Ushakov said the situation “isn't developing badly” compared with a few days ago.

For days, Mr. Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko have squabbled over the facts on the ground in Debaltseve.

Despite a cease-fire between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian rebels, fighting continued around the contested town of Debaltseve. Meanwhile, the EU has expanded its sanctions list for actions linked to the conflict. Photo: AP.

In separate phone calls with Ms. Merkel and French President François Hollande over the weekend, Mr. Putin insisted that Ukrainian forces were surrounded and should give up the town, while Mr. Poroshenko said they weren't encircled and said the rebels should abide by the cease-fire, according to a person familiar with the calls.

The four leaders also discussed the state of the cease-fire and the situation in Debaltseve in a late-night phone call Monday, the Kremlin said.

The two leaders sparred over the issue directly on Sunday in a four-way conference call with Mr. Hollande and Ms. Merkel, the person said—with Mr. Putin calmly trying to play the statesman and insisting he was fully aware of the situation on the ground even as he continued to portray Russia as a party not involved in the fighting.

September's truce deal left the Ukrainian line bulging southward around Debaltseve. Militants started their push for the town last month as that cease-fire fell apart.

By early last week, they had the town squeezed from the south and west. U.S. officials say they were supported by Russian units and equipment including air-defense, rocket and artillery systems. Russia has denied supplying equipment and fighters to the separatists.

On Feb. 9, a group of around 30 separatist soldiers and a tank quickly took over Lohvynove village to the north of Debaltseve, cutting off access from the nearest large town, Artemivsk.

Soldiers and medics say the village was defended by only a handful of Ukrainian soldiers, who were quickly overrun. Mr. Lysenko said there was “an organized withdrawal” from the village.

As talks in Minsk were wrapping up, Ukraine launched an attempt to take back the village, throwing tanks and infantry against the separatists.

Despite an early advance, they were pushed back by late afternoon. Soldiers recall the fighting as some of the fiercest yet.

“It was a meat grinder,” said a soldier at Ukraine's nearest checkpoint to Debaltseve in the village of Luhanske. “We didn't even pick up the dead, just the injured.”

The separatists quickly positioned tanks along the road and mined it, the soldier said, adding, “They weren’t simple Donetsk farmers.”

Mr. Lysenko said the attempt to retake the village was abandoned to save lives, adding that Ukraine was still able to use artillery to keep the separatists in check.

#### Time Frame of Cease-Fire Deal

- Feb. 15: Cease-fire takes effect.
- Feb. 17 to March 2: Pullback of heavy weapons, establishing a “safety zone” monitored by OSCE.
- March 3: Start dialogue on holding local elections in Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Within 30 days after the election agreement is signed, Ukraine’s parliament should ratify the election agreement.
- By March 7: Carry out a prisoner exchange.
- By end of 2015: Ukraine to carry out constitutional reform to hand more powers to rebel-held areas. After this, rebels to return control of Ukraine’s border with Russia to Kiev.
- Other steps without a deadline: Establish access for humanitarian aid. Ukraine to pass amnesty law for people involved in the conflict and restore banking ties and budget payments to rebel-held areas. Remove all foreign armed groups and weapons from Ukraine.

But the road is now impassable, leaving the several thousand soldiers in and around Debaltseve hemmed in. Mr. Sardaryan and his team of paramedics were left at the town’s main crossroads, the site of some of the fiercest shelling.

Mr. Sardaryan’s mother, another medic, stood over a map at their headquarters in Artemivsk. A line drawn on the map almost encircles Debaltseve.

“There’s no way out,” said Alla Neshchadym, 47. “It’s a double encirclement.”

Mr. Lysenko denied the town was surrounded, but soldiers and medics here in Artemivsk say it has hardly been accessible for a week.

Nearly 20 soldiers were able to break out yesterday, driving in two vehicles across fields.

“It’s a miracle they got out,” said Ms. Neshchadym, adding that other vehicles were blown up on the way.

Medics and soldiers in Artemivsk said they didn’t know of anyone making it out Monday.

For some in Ukraine, Debaltseve has taken on a symbolic value for the soldiers’ heroic resistance. But others compare the situation to another pocket that developed in August, that ended with hundreds of Ukrainian casualties when they were shelled while retreating through an agreed corridor.

At the checkpoint in Luhanske, soldiers shield themselves from the snow and icy wind. Attacks on their positions have slackened since the truce, they said, but none expect the fighting to end.

“Sooner or later it will start again,” said a 50-year-old fighter with gray flecks in his beard. “It’s just a temporary cease-fire, not peace.”

#### Shifting Lines: Russia-Backed Rebels Claim New Territory in Ukraine

The separatists have gained more than 200 square miles since they signed a first putative cease-fire with Kiev in late August, according to Ukrainian government maps and reporting by The Wall Street Journal.



Important Dates

Aug. 15, 2014:

Ukrainian forces expressed confidence that victory was near after a summer offensive pushed pro-Russia militants back.

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