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Ukraine Rebels Celebrate Their Taking of Debaltseve

Українські повстанці святкують взяття Дебальцево

Проросійські повстанці відзначили недавню перемогу під Дебальцево святковою ходою в Донецьку, де солдати отримали медалі на площі Леніна, а натовп вітав їх вигуками та оплесками, розмахуючи радянськими прапорами. Солдати, здається, були в бадьорому настрої, отримавши медалі, вони заявили про продовження боротьби з метою захопити інші міста в Східній Україні. Лідери сепаратистів висловили намір дотримуватися угоди про перемир'я, хоча вони зробили те ж саме, коли вона була підписана 12 лютого в Мінську, - якраз перед початком наступу на Дебальцево. Тоді, сепаратисти стверджували, що місто оточене, а перемир'я поширюється тільки на лінію фронту.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/world/europe/ukraine-rebels-celebrate-victory-at-strategic-city-with-a-festive-rally.html?_r=0



Pro-Russian rebels were greeted in Donetsk on Monday during a rally to celebrate their recent victory over the Ukrainian Army in Debaltseve. Credit Alexander Ermochenko/European Pressphoto Agency

Pro-Russian rebels celebrated their recent victory at Debaltseve with a festive rally on Monday in Donetsk, the main city they control, where soldiers received medals in Lenin Square and the crowd cheered and waved Soviet flags.

The soldiers appeared to be in an upbeat mood, marching into the square in disciplined formations on a sunny afternoon. After collecting their medals, they spoke of fighting onward to capture other towns in eastern Ukraine.

Morale is high on the separatist side of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, after rebel fighters pushed the Ukrainian Army out of Debaltseve, a strategic railroad hub astride the main highway from Donetsk to Luhansk. They took the town with help from regular Russian troops despite a cease-fire agreement, according to Ukraine and Western governments.

The rally in Donetsk marked a popular holiday for military veterans — Defender of the Fatherland Day — dating to Soviet times.

“Thank you! Thank you!” the crowd chanted as the rebel soldiers marched into the square. A banner hanging behind the stage, next to a statue of Lenin, proclaimed that “the people’s militia is the reliable defense of the republic.”

Ivan S. Pikarev, a member of the militia, wore a sparkling new medal for having left the cover of his bunker during a mortar attack to help bring two fellow soldiers inside. “Back in the summer, I didn’t believe we would achieve anything,” he said of the war, now nearly 10 months old. “Then we pushed them back. They don’t have the fighting spirit we do.”

The separatist leadership has expressed an intention to adhere now to the cease-fire agreement, though it did the same when the agreement was signed in Minsk, Belarus, on Feb. 12, just before they began their offensive to seize Debaltseve. The separatists argued that the town was surrounded and that the cease-fire applied only to the front lines.

The foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany, the governments that negotiated the truce, plan to meet in Paris on Tuesday to patch up the unraveling deal, according to Reuters, which cited a French diplomatic source whom it did not identify.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia said in a televised interview on Monday that his country remained committed to the Minsk cease-fire agreement, saying that if all sides put it into effect, “I am sure the situation will gradually come to normal.” He brushed aside accusations that Russia had stirred the conflict in eastern Ukraine for its own advantage. “No one wants a conflict on the periphery of Europe,” he said.

The Ukrainian military said on Monday that it would delay pulling its heavy weapons back from the front lines, despite an apparent agreement between the army and the rebels over the weekend to start the withdrawal on Sunday. The military said separatist forces fired artillery volleys at two villages in the northern part of the Donetsk region on Monday while continuing to assault the fortifications protecting the port city of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov.

Ukraine will withdraw its artillery only after calm has prevailed on the front lines for at least 24 hours, the chief spokesman for the general staff, Vladislav Seleznyov, said at a briefing in Kiev, the capital. “Because the militants continue to shell the positions of our military, it’s impossible for now to speak of pulling back heavy weapons,” Mr. Seleznyov said.

Col. Valentin Fedichiv, a deputy commander of military operations in the east, told Channel 5 television on Monday of another setback for the military: An American-supplied counter-battery radar system, which spots the source of incoming artillery fire, was lost in the hurried retreat from Debaltseve.

Colonel Fedichiv said that as officers in the town prepared for the retreat, they rigged explosives to destroy any major equipment that would have to be left behind, including armored vehicles and the radar system. “The last battalion had an order to blow up everything,” he told the television station. “We heard explosions, but the detonations may not have worked on all equipment.”

In Donetsk, the separatist government asked on Monday for a local cease-fire in the area of the city’s combat-ravaged airport, where they planned to use heavy construction equipment to move concrete rubble and unearth the bodies of soldiers who were crushed beneath.

Fierce fighting raged at the airport until late January, when the separatists succeeded in taking it by collapsing the upper floors of a building onto the government troops who were holding out on lower levels. The digging would be overseen by the Red Cross, according to a separatist statement.

The main rebel leader, Aleksandr V. Zakharchenko, who was wounded leading his troops in the battle of Debaltseve after signing the truce agreement in Minsk, issued a statement on Monday from the hospital where he was being treated, congratulating his followers on the martial holiday.

“Today, our opponents are negotiating with us, as they fear us and respect our strength,” he said. “This is, more than anything, thanks to you.”