

Pro-Russian rebels reject peace deal, launch offensive

By **MSTYSLAV CHERNOV**
Associated Press

DONETSK, Ukraine — Pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine rejected a previously signed peace deal Friday and launched a new multipronged offensive against Ukrainian government troops, upending recent European attempts to mediate an end to the fighting.

The main separatist leader in the rebellious Donetsk region vowed to push Ukrainian soldiers out of the area and said insurgents would not take part in any more cease-fire talks. Another rebel went even further, saying they would not abide by a peace deal signed in September.

Separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko said rebel fighters went on the offensive to gain more territory and forestall a Ukrainian attack. He declared they would push government troops to the border of the Donetsk region and possibly beyond.

“Attempts to talk about a cease-fire will no longer be undertaken by our side,” Zakharchenko said.

The peace deal signed in September in the Belarusian capital of Minsk envisaged a cease-fire and a pullout of heavy weapons from a division line in eastern Ukraine. It has been repeatedly violated by both sides, and heavy artillery and rocket barrages have increased the civilian death toll in the last few weeks.

Foreign ministers from



AP Photo/Igor Ivanov

Passengers killed when a trolley bus was damaged by a mortar shell are seen inside a bus in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine, Thursday. A new peace initiative for Ukraine began taking shape as mortar shells rained down Thursday on the center of the main rebel-held city in the east, killing at least 13 people at a bus stop.

Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany agreed Wednesday to revive that division line, but fighting has continued unabated. The U.N. human rights agency on Friday raised its estimate of the conflict’s overall death toll to nearly 5,100 since April.

The tentative peace deal forged this week in Berlin called for Ukrainian troops and Russian-backed separatists to pull back their heavy arms 9 miles on either side of the line, although there was no agreement on a withdrawal of troops.

But rebel spokesman Eduard Basurin threw that agreement into doubt, saying the insurgents “will no longer consider the Minsk agreement in the form it was signed,” although he added that they will remain open for

peace talks.

Basurin’s bold statement contradicted the official position of Russia, which has repeatedly pledged respect for the Minsk agreement, even though it has been reluctant to meet its end of the deal, which also requested the withdrawal of foreign fighters and the monitoring of the Russian-Ukrainian border by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Battles intensified last weekend over Donetsk airport, a gleaming showcase for the Euro 2012 soccer championship that has been reduced to rubble by months of clashes. Rebels eventually took control of its terminal. Fighting has continued on its fringes.

Zakharchenko said rebel fighters were advancing in

three directions in the Donetsk region and also pressing their attack in two other areas in the Luhansk region.

“We will hit them until we reach the border of Donetsk region, and ... if I see the danger for Donetsk from any other city, I will destroy this threat there,” he said.

A top NATO official confirmed that rebels had pushed west and received reinforcements. U.S. Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove said air-defense and electronic-warfare equipment have been detected in eastern Ukraine — hardware that, in the past, coincided with the incursion of Russian troops into Ukraine.

At the international economic forum in Davos, Switzerland, a Russian deputy prime minister vowed that Moscow would not be cowed by the sanctions the West has imposed upon Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

Igor Shuvalov warned the West against trying to topple Russian President Vladimir Putin, reflecting the Kremlin’s view that the European Union and U.S. sanctions are aimed at regime change.

“When a Russian feels any foreign pressure, he will never give up his leader,” Shuvalov said Friday. “We will survive any hardship in the country — eat less food, use less electricity.”

The Russian currency has lost half its value in recent months from the double blow of sanctions and a plunge in world oil prices.

Justices will review use of midazolam as execution drug

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court is stepping into the issue of lethal injection executions for the first time since 2008 in an appeal filed by death row inmates in Oklahoma.

The justices agreed Friday to review whether the sedative midazolam can be used in executions because of concerns that it does not produce a deep, comalike unconsciousness and ensure that a prisoner does not experience intense and needless pain when other drugs are injected to kill him. The order came eight days after the court refused to halt the execution of an Oklahoma man that employed the same combination of drugs.

Oklahoma, as well as Florida, uses midazolam as one of three drugs in lethal injection executions. The second drug serves to paralyze the inmate and the third one is used to stop his heart.

The case will be argued in late April, an attorney for the men said Friday. A decision is expected by the end of June.

The appeal was brought to the court by four Oklahoma inmates with execution dates ranging from January to March. The justices allowed Charles Warner to be put to death on January 15 and denied stays of execution for the other three.

At the time, Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote a dissent that was joined by three other justices, calling on the court to examine whether the drug could be used in accordance with the constitutional prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.

Friday’s order does not formally call a halt to those scheduled procedures. Dale Baich, an attorney for the inmates, said he would ask the court to block the exe-

cutions until the case is decided.

“Oklahoma’s execution protocol has been affirmed as constitutional by two federal courts,” Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt said Friday. “We will continue to defend the constitutionality of this protocol in order to preserve (the Department of Corrections’) ability to proceed with the sentences that were given to each inmate by a jury of their peers.”

In 2008, the justices upheld the use of a different three-drug combination in a case from Kentucky and set a high bar for challenges to lethal injections. Chief Justice John Roberts wrote then that the court probably would not stop executions unless “the condemned prisoner establishes that the state’s lethal injection protocol creates a demonstrated risk of severe pain.”

What has changed since 2008 is that states have been forced to change the drugs they use in executions after drug manufacturers took steps to ensure their products are not used in executions.

The inmates are trying to stop their executions, arguing that the state would essentially be experimenting on them by injecting them with unproven and untested drugs.

“The drug protocol in Oklahoma is not capable of producing a humane execution, even if it is administered properly,” Baich said.

Last April, Oklahoma used midazolam for the first time in a grisly procedure. Inmate Clayton Lockett clenched his teeth, moaned and writhed on the gurney before a doctor noticed a problem with the intravenous line and the execution was called off. Lockett died 43 minutes after the procedure began.

Yemen’s Shiite rebels try to avoid overstepping amid protest

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Yemen’s Shiite rebels faced mounting pressures and signs of internal divisions Friday after the U.S.-backed president and his cabinet resigned rather than submit at gunpoint to their increasing demands for greater power.

With thousands of demonstrators on both sides taking to the streets across the impoverished Arab country, the rebels appeared wary of the dangers of overstepping in Yemen’s minefield of tribal politics, sectarian divisions, al-Qaida militancy and a strong secessionist movement.

Although rebel gunmen manned checkpoints throughout the capital and continued besieging the houses of government ministers, they made no public attempt to fill the vacuum created by the resignations of President Abed Rabbo Hadi, his prime minister and cabinet. And there were signs that the national parliament would reject the resignations when it meets Sunday.

Indeed, it seemed as though the rebels, known as the Houthis, do not want to rule the country outright and would prefer that Hadi remain as a figurehead president.

Challenges on multiple fronts likely to test new Saudi king

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia’s new monarch inherits the throne at a moment when the oil-rich kingdom is being buffeted by a plunge in the value of its most valuable commodity, growing challenges by activists at home and deepening turmoil on its borders that stands to benefit rival Iran.

Those who know King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud note the 79-year-old’s diplomatic skills, honed over nearly five decades as governor of the capital, Riyadh. Those abilities will be put to the test as he positions his country to confront a collapsing Yemen on its southern frontier and threats from the extremist Islamic State group to the north in Iraq.

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But he is unlikely to bring fundamental changes to the country’s policies and its embrace of the ultraconservative Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam.

Saudi kings derive their legitimacy through the support of the clerical establishment, limiting the potential for radical change. Salman already has had plenty of opportunity to put his stamp on Saudi policies, both in his role as defense minister since 2011 and as he increasingly took over duties for his half brother, King Abdullah, who died early Friday.

Obama heading to India, hoping to improve ties

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama arrives in India this weekend anxious to take another step in moving the world’s two largest democracies beyond the deep tensions that have

beset their relationship in recent years.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Washington last fall appeared to ease some of the strain, with officials in both countries praising the easy chemistry between Modi and Obama.



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