
UKRAINE CEASEFIRE LARGELY HOLDING IN THE EAST

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A fragile ceasefire appears to be holding in eastern Ukraine, despite the reported death of one soldier.

The agreement to halt fighting and withdraw heavy weapons from the front line came into force on Monday, after it was brokered over the weekend.

Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed rebels have been fighting since 2014.

This latest ceasefire began as Russia defended its decision to recognise rebel-issued passports as a "humanitarian" gesture.

Russia accepts rebel passports

A new, bloody chapter

Key points of Minsk deal

A peace deal for eastern Ukraine was signed in the Belarusian capital of Minsk in February 2015 but since then previously agreed ceasefires have not held for long, with both Ukrainian government forces and the rebels repeatedly accused of breaking them.

However, the newly agreed truce was said to be largely holding, despite the Ukrainian army reporting one soldier being killed and another injured in the past 24 hours.

Rebel commanders said there had been very little fighting.

The ceasefire was agreed after an upsurge in violence last month. More than 9,800 people have died since the conflict began in 2014.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters the passports move was to help struggling rebel regions in the east, which have faced a transportation blockade imposed by Ukrainian nationalists.

He also dismissed the Ukrainian government's belief that the move violated the Minsk accord, saying: "These aren't the documents of an officially recognised state. They are de facto issued on the territory of the region."

Germany and France have both condemned the decision as "contradicting" the Minsk agreement.

Separately, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov brushed aside a suggestion Russia could lease

Crimea from Ukraine.

Kremlin-backed forces took control of Crimea in 2014, after which the mainly-Russian speaking area voted to join Russia. Neither the West nor Ukraine recognise the outcome of the referendum.

However, Russia now considers Crimea part of its territory and Mr Lavrov shrugged off the latest rumoured peace plan, reported by US newspapers.

"It is hard for me to comment on this because it is impossible to lease something from yourself. I cannot even add anything to that," Mr Lavrov said during a news conference in Moscow.

Kaynak/Source: