

In Ukraine's war-weary east, intensifying shelling and battered homes signal attempts at provocation by Russia

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FULL TEXT

STANYTSIA LUHANSKA, Ukraine —The work to repair the roof from Thursday's shelling continued even as Saturday's booming thuds, edging closer and closer, signaled a new round of artillery fire nearby. An elderly woman riding a bicycle didn't flinch as the shock from the bombardment rattled off the already-broken window panes. "Don't be scared," said Diana Levenets, who lives on the street where two houses were hit by shells two days ago. She then counted the seconds between the rumbles, to tell whether this was shelling from a mortar or a howitzer, which launches artillery farther and more viciously. This is a survival tip everyone in this war-battered eastern Ukrainian village of Stanytsia Luhanska knows, but before this week, they hadn't had to use it in years. Their village hadn't experienced major shelling in six years before this latest wave.

"I don't want to believe there will be some new military action," Levenets said. "But I don't believe whatever Russia is saying. I don't believe their peaceful statements or supposedly peaceful intentions."

President Biden warned Friday that Russia could launch a military attack on Ukraine "in the coming days." For the Ukrainians living in the eastern Donbas region, where conflict between Ukrainian government forces and the separatists they say are Russian proxies has been a daily reality since 2014, the threat of a fresh invasion didn't faze them much.

But the sharp upswing in firing from the separatists' side over the past three days has shaken even the war-weary. They now fear that the Russian-backed forces will continue to hammer their homes as a way to provoke Ukrainian troops, who are under instruction not to open fire. U.S. officials have warned that Russia could stage an attack from Kyiv's forces on the separatist-held territories to justify Moscow's invasion.

Separatist officials have accused Ukraine on the social media and messaging app Telegram of firing on the territories that their forces control and said they had to respond accordingly. On Friday, the leaders of the two self-proclaimed republics announced a mass evacuation, claiming that Ukraine is planning an offensive in the region, which Ukrainian officials denied. The scope of the evacuations is unclear.

"We have no doubt in our minds where this shelling is coming from and who is firing it," Levenets said, pointing to the hills where the separatist forces are posted. "We can literally see where it's coming from."

The shelling in the government-controlled side of the Donbas region has increased "tenfold" since Thursday, the Ukrainian Armed Forces said in a statement. On Saturday, two soldiers were killed, five were injured and there were 70 total cease-fire violations by the Russian-backed separatists, the military said in a Facebook statement.

Outside the city of Novoluhanske, along the demarcation line with the self-proclaimed Donetsk separatist territory, Col. Oleksandr Zinevich showed journalists where separatist forces have been pounding an abandoned industrial area with artillery in recent days. Earlier Saturday, a 27-year-old Ukrainian private was sprinting to shelter across the asphalt when he was knocked from his feet by a shell.

"He's going to lose his hand," Zinevich said, scrolling through photographs of the injury on his phone.

A civilian fisherman had been shot in the morning, Zinevich said, but not seriously injured. This area has not been a

hot spot in years, but Zinevich said he sees the eruption of attacks over the past three days —including artillery, mortars and grenades —as evidence of a coordinated campaign being launched by Russia.

Moscow is trying to provoke Ukrainian forces into responding and giving Russia an excuse to launch an attack, he said. He has told his troops not to respond unless their lives are in danger.

"The Russian Federation is trying to lead us into war with a lie," Zinevich said.

A few minutes later, as a group of journalists and the soldiers escorting them were pulling away in military vehicles, an artillery shell slammed into the ground 200 yards away. The leading vehicles raced from the spot as more shells sounded to the east. A man who had been tinkering with his pickup truck ran full speed toward the village.

At the entrance to a military blast shelter near an apartment building, soldiers rushed a group of other journalists and two residents inside. All were eventually evacuated from the area unharmed.

The escalation's flash point was in the village of Stanytsia Luhanska on Thursday, when a wall in a kindergarten's sports room crumpled after it got hit by artillery at 8:45 a.m. No children were harmed; they were frantically evacuated into the hallway and told the loud sound they heard was just thunder. Had the strike come 15 minutes later, the kids would have been in the room when the shell landed.

That night, the village came under fire again. Shells landed on two homes, causing the roofs to collapse. The aftermath was wood splinters and broken glass scattered along the living room. The family that lives there spent Saturday morning packing up their spring and summer clothes to hide in their basement. They don't plan on evacuating but are worried more artillery strikes will destroy all of their belongings.

The plastic covering the space where window glass was shattered started to rattle anew as shelling grew more intense outside.

"This has been endless day and night," said Katya, the matriarch of the home who declined to give her surname.

"And we're scared it's just the start."

The construction crew repairing the roof next door continued its work. The kindergarten that was shelled days ago plans to welcome its students back on Monday.

Hendrix reported from Novoluhanske, Ukraine.

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