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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Rebel city waits for Kiev's final onslaught

Ukraine's new president has vowed to quell Russian separatists in 'hours, not weeks', but he risks humiliation and high civilian casualties if he fails

Mark Franchetti, Slovyansk Published: 1 June 2014



Heavily armed Russian separatists stand guard at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Slovyansk (Dmitry Beliaikov )

WHEN sporadic mortar and artillery fire began to hit the outskirts of Slovyansk, a once sleepy town in eastern Ukraine now held by armed pro-Russian militias, Olga Prokhorenko was horrified but refused to flee her home.

Like most of her neighbours, the retired office worker could not believe war was looming. But last

week, as she walked across a yard between dilapidated Soviet-era buildings, a mortar shell fired by the Ukrainian army exploded in the densely populated neighbourhood.

Prokhorenko, 60, was hit in the back by shrapnel. She fell onto a patch of grass and died, her eyes wide open and her white blouse drenched in blood.

“People say you must be strong and live on, but how?” said her son, Svyatoslav. “Now we’ll bury her and after that I don’t know what to do. The most terrifying thing is that there’s no end in sight.

“When I rushed to where my mother was killed there were explosions everywhere. I kept asking myself, ‘Will I make it?’”

An impoverished place two hours’ drive from Donetsk in the industrial heartland of Ukraine, with a population of 120,000, Slovyansk was overrun in April by the separatists, who have controlled it since, besieged by the Ukrainian army. Militants and soldiers exchange fire while civilians are caught in the middle.

More than 20 unarmed residents have been killed and dozens wounded by indiscriminate Ukrainian army shelling.

Last week the pro-Moscow separatists brought down a Ukrainian military helicopter a few miles away, killing 12 soldiers, including a general. There are no reliable figures but the militants have also suffered heavy losses.

Petro Poroshenko, a confectionery billionaire elected as the Ukrainian president last Sunday, has promised to grant the turbulent pro-Russian east greater autonomy. He has also said he is open to talks with the Kremlin, which has strong vested interests in the region and is being accused by America of stoking the violence.



First,  
though,

The girlfriend of a separatist shows off his rifle (Dmitry Beliaikov )

Poroshenko, nicknamed the “The Chocolate King”, has vowed to intensify an anti-terrorist operation in

the east, claiming — to ridicule — that it will be over “in hours, not weeks”.

A day after his election, a battle involving Ukrainian MiG fighters and helicopter gunships raged over Donetsk airport, which is now back in the hands of the authorities.

Several civilians were caught in the crossfire and the separatists suffered their heaviest losses since violence broke out two months ago, when a truck carrying 50 fighters — mostly Russian volunteers — was bombed. The attack has served to radicalise the separatists and cause tension among them. Last week, Battalion Vostok — well-trained militants who fought at the airport and include many Russians — ousted local rebels from a state building in Donetsk.

Reclaiming control of Slovyansk presents Poroshenko with his greatest military dilemma. Given his bullish claims, leaving the town in the hands of the militants would be a humiliation.

But trying to retake it by force would risk civilian casualties — adding to the hatred of the government in Kiev, and angering the Kremlin.

Slovyansk last week felt surreal; as the air filled with the thumps of artillery and mortar fire and the occasional crackling of automatic gunfire, people went about their daily business around the central Lenin square.



A wounded civilian lies in hospital (Dmitry Beliakov )

While a Ukrainian fighter jet circled high in the sky, mothers walked with pushchairs and children played in the street as ambulances took seven wounded civilians to hospital. One was Rinat Ogurayev, 4, whose screams could be heard from the hospital

hall. “What are they doing? Have they completely lost their mind? Why is the army killing its own people?” asked Irina Ogurayev, the boy’s tearful grandmother.

Schools and factories have shut, children are being moved away and civilians are leaving, but most remain in the town, where they huddle in cellars to shelter from shelling as they wait for the Ukrainian onslaught.

Dozens of barricades made of concrete and sandbags are manned by separatists — a rag-tag force of heavily armed former soldiers and police, plus drop-outs and misfits in flip-flops who have never been

in a firefight.

Showing his lack of military experience, one gunman accidentally fired a heavy-calibre machinegun, in my presence, in a weapon-filled hangar, narrowly missing a group of fellow rebels and piercing an armoured car.

Masked gunmen with AK-47s and grenade launchers race across the town in military vehicles and stolen cars, including a new four-wheel-drive Porsche.

Some of the locals blame the separatists for launching hit-and-run attacks on Ukrainian positions from populated areas, so provoking retaliatory shelling.

“I am terrified that the Ukrainian army will bomb the whole town and we’ll all perish under the rubble,” said Irma Krat, a Ukrainian journalist who has been held hostage by the separatists in Slovyansk for five weeks.

Although she has not been mistreated, she is held under armed guard. Her captors said they would release her only in exchange for some of their own men taken prisoner.

On the edge of Slovyansk the separatists have dug in. “We are waiting for an all-out assault,” said Andrei, 25. “If they launch airstrikes and the army comes in, this place will turn into a bloodbath.”

Referring to the capital of Chechnya, all but razed to the ground by the Russians during a decade of conflict against Islamic rebels, he said: “This has all gone too far. If they try to take Slovyansk it will turn into a small Grozny.”

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