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## Ukrainian regime launches fascist-led crackdown

By Alex Lantier

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The Western-backed regime in Kiev and fascist militias allied to it launched a bloody crackdown against pro-Russian protests across eastern Ukraine yesterday. With the Kremlin massing forces on Russia's border with Ukraine, threatening to intervene defend ethnic Russians, the situation is on the brink of a war between Russia and Ukraine, which could escalate into a direct clash between Russia and NATO.

Deadly fighting broke out in the eastern Ukrainian city of Slavyansk, held by pro-Russian protesters. Ukrainian armored personnel carriers reportedly assaulted several checkpoints set up by pro-Russian forces, though protesters continued to hold the city. Five protesters were reported killed amid contradictory reports. Several Ukrainian armored vehicles were reportedly set afire in the fighting, and protesters rebuilt the checkpoints later in the day.

Thirty thugs armed with baseball bats from the fascist Right Sector militia, which led the February 22 putsch that installed the current regime in Kiev, stormed buildings held by protesters in the nearby port city of Mariupol.

Responsibility for this bloodshed lies above all with the United States and its European allies, who have pressed Kiev to launch these assaults in a policy calculated to provoke Moscow. A

first attempt to organize a crackdown a week ago with Ukrainian regular troops came after CIA director John Brennan's visit to Kiev. It quickly ground down, however, amid popular opposition and refusals by Ukraine troops to fire on the population.

This bloody crackdown underscores the filthy hypocrisy of the Western intervention in Ukraine. During the February putsch, Western governments and media denounced the pro-Russian regime's attempts to crack down on the fascist groups leading the protests and denounced moves to mobilize the army. Now, after a visit to Kiev by US Vice President Joe Biden, the unelected, far-right puppet regime in Kiev is unleashing a new military crackdown with Western support. Aware of the lack of support more broadly in the army, it is relying directly on the fascists.

Russian media cited Kremlin estimates that the Kiev regime had mobilized 11,000 troops, 160 tanks, 230 infantry vehicles, and 150 artillery pieces for the crackdown.

Right Sector leader Dmytro Yarosh announced that he was moving to the eastern Ukrainian industrial city of Dnipropetrovsk and setting up a "Donbas" fighting squadron. "I moved my headquarters to Dnepropetrovsk," he said. "The purpose is to prevent the spread of the Kremlin infection."

Yarosh boasted that he was working directly with the regime in Kiev. "We coordinate all of our actions with the leadership of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the security services of Ukraine," he said.

In an interview with Russia's *Gazeta*, the leader of the pro-Russian forces in Slavyansk, Vyacheslav Ponomarev, said that the formation of a Right Sector-led battalion in the east "could lead to fratricidal war."

The Kiev regime's interior minister, Arsen Avakov, moved to stoke this civil war, announcing the creation of a special force of 12,000 volunteer fighters to crush the pro-Russian protests. It will reportedly include not only Yarosh's "Donbass" squadron, but also a "Dnepr" fighting battalion under the control of business oligarch Igor Kolomoisky.

The Kiev regime is also imposing special pay cuts on eastern Ukrainian workers, ostensibly to pay for repairs to the city of Kiev after the February putsch. Some 2,000 coal miners working in mines in Krasnodon for Ukraine's richest man, oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, are reportedly striking to protest the state-enforced pay cut.

These provocations come amid a large-scale military build-up throughout eastern Europe by the US and the NATO powers. US paratroopers landed in Poland today, part of a broader build-up that has seen US forces sent also to the Baltic States, Romania, and the Black Sea.

US President Barack Obama, speaking from Japan while on a tour of Asia, indicated that further economic sanctions were “teed up” and could rapidly be imposed on Russia.

After a meeting of Russia’s top military council, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced large-scale Russian military exercises, apparently to prepare an intervention in eastern Ukraine. Videos posted to YouTube showed Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers massing around Novoshakhtinsk and nearby cities along the Ukrainian-Russian border.

Shoigu also criticized the deployment of US troops throughout Eastern Europe and the decision of the Ukrainian regime to launch a crackdown.

“The starting gun on the use of weapons against their own civilians has already been fired,” he said. “If today this military machine is not stopped, it will lead to a large number of dead and wounded... Civilians are being attacked by national guard units as well as by battalions of extremists from Right Sector.”

The military standoff between Moscow and the Kiev regime and its NATO backers, which had led to the gravest danger of war between the major powers since World War II, is the product of the reckless decision of Washington and Berlin to support the fascist putsch in February. Having unleashed these forces and stoked broad popular opposition in more pro-Russian sections of eastern Ukraine, the imperialist powers are now escalating the bloodshed, apparently seeking to goad Moscow into an intervention with potentially disastrous consequences.

US Secretary of State John Kerry’s denunciation of Moscow yesterday evening was a political fraud. He attacked Moscow for not respecting the terms of the April 17 Geneva agreement on Ukraine, which called for all armed militias to stand down. Accusing Russia of “distraction, deception, and destabilization,” he said: “Not a single Russian official has publicly gone on television in Ukraine and called upon the separatists ... to give up their weapons and get out of the Ukrainian buildings.”

In fact, the United States and its European allies negotiated this agreement in bad faith. Not only did they not call on their fascist allies to disarm, they are building fascist militias up in order to carry out a violent crackdown against the population in sections of the country more closely tied to Russia.

Russian officials made repeated statements indicating that the Western powers’ policies were jeopardizing vital Russian national security interests and might justify military intervention.

“If the Kiev regime started military action against the country’s population, this is without doubt a very serious crime,” Russian President Vladimir Putin said at a media forum.

Putin said that the eastern Ukraine crackdown justified Russia's support for pro-Russian protesters in Crimea who declared independence from the Kiev regime, and ultimately rejoined Russia. "We would have seen there the same things which are now happening in the east of Ukraine or even worse. That's one more proof to the fact we did it all correctly and in time," Putin said.

In a statement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov concluded that aggressive moves by the Western powers in Ukraine were part of a broader campaign to isolate Russia and undermine its national security.

"Few doubt that we are talking not only about Ukraine's fate," Lavrov said. "They are trying to use Ukraine as a pawn in a geopolitical game. Our Western partners, first and foremost the United States, tried to behave as winners in the Cold War and pretend that one can ignore Russia in European affairs and undertake activities that directly damage Russian security interests."