

Ukraine, Russia and the Kremlin-backed separatists signed a cease-fire deal Friday after five months of bloodshed, and Europe readied additional sanctions on Moscow. NATO leaders created a new force designed to prevent any aggression by Russia against alliance members. Gunfire and shelling appeared to fall silent across eastern Ukraine shortly after the appointed hour, to the relief of war-weary residents. But the U.S. voiced skepticism that the rebels and Russia would stop violating Ukrainian sovereignty.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said he ordered his forces to halt hostilities at 6 p.m. (11 a.m. EDT) after the deal was signed in Minsk, the Belarusian capital, by all three sides and a representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Separatist leaders also said they ordered their forces to hold their fire.

Poroshenko said the cease-fire was based on an agreement reached during a "long conversation" with Russian President Vladimir Putin and would be watched over by international monitors from the OSCE.

The negotiators also agreed on the withdrawal of all heavy weaponry, the release of all prisoners and the delivery of humanitarian aid to devastated cities in eastern Ukraine, Heidi Tagliavini of the OSCE told reporters in Minsk.

Mikhail Zurabov, the Russian ambassador to Ukraine who also signed the deal, described the exchange of lists of more than 1,000 prisoners from each side as a "breakthrough." Poroshenko said a prisoner exchange could begin as early as Saturday.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said the Kremlin welcomes the signing and hopes that all sides will fulfill the agreements and continue the negotiation process "for the full settlement of the crisis in Ukraine," the Interfax news agency reported.

U.S. President Barack Obama said he was hopeful the cease-fire would hold but skeptical that the rebels would follow through and that Russia would stop violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"It has to be tested," Obama said at the close of a two-day NATO summit in Wales.

Noting that the U.S. and Europe were finalizing even tougher sanctions on Moscow, Obama said the most effective way to ensure the cease-fire's success was to move ahead with those measures in hopes of keeping up the pressure on Russia.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said "if certain processes get underway, we are prepared to suspend sanctions" against Russia. "We have to see whether this cease-fire is being applied. Do Russian troops withdraw, so far as they're there?" she said.

Keeping the pressure on Moscow, European Union ambassadors gave preliminary approval Friday night to new Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia involving access to capital markets and trade in arms and defense technology, dual-use goods and sensitive technologies, an EU diplomat said. More people will also be added to the trade bloc's entry ban and asset freeze, said the diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity because she was not authorized to make public statements on the issue. Final approval is expected Monday, with the new measures likely taking effect Tuesday, the diplomat said.

Leonid Kuchma, a former Ukrainian president who signed the deal, said there was "a genuine desire" for peace. But even though Poroshenko and the separatist leaders have ordered their forces to stop fighting, "it doesn't mean that someone will not fire from behind the corner," he said.

Kuchma said they will set up a task force by Monday to organize not only the exchange of

prisoners and delivery of humanitarian aid, but also to establish how the rebellious eastern regions of Ukraine will be governed.

Poroshenko said Ukraine was ready to decentralize power to allow the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to have greater economic freedom and the right to use the Russian language.

The talks revealed divisions and uncertainty in the rebel ranks.

Alexander Zakharchenko, the separatist leader from the Donetsk region, said he was "very pleased and happy that we managed to take the first steps to change the military situation into a political discussion."

His counterpart from the Luhansk region, Igor Plotnitsky, was less enthusiastic. While saying the talks showed that "we can deal with Kiev," he described the conflict as between "one people divided by ideology." Plotnitsky said the Luhansk separatists had to agree to the cease-fire to save lives, but he warned that they had not abandoned their "course for secession."

Ukraine, NATO and Western nations have accused Russia of backing the separatists with weapons, supplies and thousands of regular troops. Moscow has denied this, but a NATO military officer told The Associated Press that the number of Russian soldiers directly involved in the conflict has grown past the alliance's earlier estimate of at least 1,000.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the truce agreement and encouraged the contacts between Poroshenko and Putin to continue, his spokesman said. Ban stressed that "credible and comprehensive monitoring and verification are essential" to the success of the cease-fire and peace plan.

Since the fighting began in the east in mid-April, nearly 2,600 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes, according to U.N. estimates.

NATO leaders at the summit also approved plans to create a rapid response force to counter Russian aggression, with a headquarters in Eastern Europe that could quickly mobilize if an alliance country were to come under attack. Ukraine is not a NATO member, but the entire alliance has been alarmed by Russia's actions in Ukraine, and Russia is under both U.S. and EU sanctions for its support of the rebels.

"It sends a clear message to any potential aggressor: Should you even think of attacking one ally, you will be facing the whole alliance," NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said.

In Mariupol, the southern port city that was widely feared to be the rebels' next target, residents expressed relief at the cease-fire.

Just hours after blasts resounded on the outskirts, 55-year-old Nikolai Mesyats was fishing off a city pier. "I am only for peace," he said. "How many people must die on both sides? God, these young people are dying. Brother is fighting against brother. That's not right."

A rebel offensive in southeastern Ukraine in the last two weeks has turned the tide of the war against Ukrainian forces, who until recently had appeared close to crushing the rebellion.

On Friday morning, AP reporters heard heavy shelling north and east of Mariupol. The city of 500,000 people lies on the Sea of Azov, between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in March. The shelling appeared to indicate that rebels had partially surrounded the area.

Seizing Mariupol would give the rebels a strong foothold on the coast and raise the threat that they could carve out a land corridor between Russia and Crimea.

But as the cease-fire went into effect, AP reporters heard no shelling in Mariupol for several hours, and several Ukrainian tanks returned to the city.

On the eastern road out of Mariupol, where volunteer fighters have been standing guard for

days after rebel forces took over the border town of Novoazovsk, the mood ranged from resignation to disappointment.

Dimitro Khreschinsky, a leader of the Jesus Christ unit in the pro-Kiev volunteer Shakhtarsk Battalion, said that although he didn't agree with the decision to lay down arms, his fellow fighters would abide by it. He didn't believe the rebels would, though.

"The last cease-fire led to an intensification of fire from their side and an increase in casualties on our side," Khreschinsky said. "I think the same thing will happen now."

In Donetsk, the largest rebel-held city, some shelling was heard after the truce was declared, but the guns appeared to have gone silent within an hour.

Many greeted the tentative peace with relief, although tensions remain high.

"It has to be. There is no other way," said Alexander Ivanov, 67.--AP