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United States Mission to the OSCE

Ongoing Violations of International Law and Defiance of OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation in Ukraine

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires, a.i. Harry Kamian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna December 14, 2017

The United States strongly encourages the sides to solidify their initial agreement to exchange detainees before the upcoming holidays. An exchange is long overdue and owed to the families of the nearly four hundred detainees involved. We encourage the parties to build upon these initial steps, ensure this element of the Minsk agreements is fulfilled, and demonstrate that progress is possible. The sides were able to come to terms for a two-day local ceasefire on December 9 and December 10 to allow for long overdue repairs to the Stanytsia Luhanska bridge. While both measures are important, only a full and permanent ceasefire will ease the human suffering in eastern Ukraine, as this conflict enters its fourth winter. The Russian Federation has the ability to end the violence.

Mr. Chair, let me emphasize the gravity of the worsening violence along the line of contact. The December 6 SMM weekly report noted steep increases in ceasefire violations and the use of Minsk-proscribed weapons in both Donetsk and Luhansk. The United States is alarmed that these heightened levels of fighting appear to be concentrated around the Avdiivka-Yasynuvata-Donetsk airport area. Such intense firepower has not been seen since February of this year. Moreover, throughout the Donbas, the SMM recorded the use of heavy weapons near populated areas, and damage to residential structures on both sides of the line of contact.

Russia initiated and continues to fuel the war in eastern Ukraine. Russia must improve security and implement its commitments under the Minsk agreements, which include ensuring its proxies abide by the ceasefire and reduce tensions along the line of contact. The presence of Russia-led forces is endangering peace and stability.

The December 6 SMM weekly report also notes continued obstruction and interference in SMM operations and attempted destruction of SMM equipment by Russia-led forces. In Luhansk city, medical staff at a hospital told the SMM that they could not provide information on reported civilian casualties to the SMM without the permission of so-called “LPR” members. The SMM also had to interrupt an unmanned aerial vehicle flight due to small-arms fire that it assessed was targeting the UAV from so-called “LPR” positions. The SMM reported these incidents and requested JCCC assistance in ensuring a rapid response, however, there have been no remedial actions taken. The United States repeats its call on Russia to end this longstanding campaign of interference in, and disruption of, SMM operations. We also repeat our call for Russia to allow for the SMM’s safe access throughout Ukraine, including up to and along the internationally recognized border with Russia.

While many participating States observed International Human Rights Day on December 10, Russia continued its systemic harassment and abuses against Crimean Tatars and others in Crimea opposed to the occupation. We were troubled by reports that on December 12, security services raided the homes of Crimean Tatars in the village of Urazhainiy, including that of the regional head of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis, Ibrahim Osmanov, on baseless pretexts, and detained his son, Rustem, who is also an activist. Occupation authorities arrested, tried, and fined Rustem Osmanov in retaliation for his participation in peaceful protests back in October.

Mr. Chair, human rights organizations have documented over 60 Ukrainian political prisoners detained or imprisoned by Russian authorities in occupied Crimea or in Russia for simply speaking out against Russia's occupation and attempted annexation. On November 27, the Moscow City Court extended the detention of Ukrainian journalist Roman Sushchenko, who was lured to Moscow to facilitate his arrest, and he now faces up to 20 years of imprisonment on fabricated charges of espionage for his articles critical of Russia's occupation.

Last week, we concluded the fourth OSCE Ministerial since Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russia's actions defy our shared OSCE principles and commitments, and have claimed over ten thousand lives, with forty thousand more wounded. Mr. Chair, since the Russian invasion, NATO's resolve has strengthened. The Ukrainian people and public are more unified and European-oriented. Conditions for Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the Donbas are undeniably worse than in the rest of the country. And yet, Russian callousness continues. Last week in Vienna, at the Ministerial, we all saw, we all heard on the issue of Ukraine, Russia is isolated and on the wrong side of history.

In closing, the United States fully supports Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. As Secretary of State Tillerson clearly stated last week during his opening statement at the OSCE Ministerial: "We will never accept Russia's occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea. Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns full control of the peninsula to Ukraine." Mr. Chair, we join our European and other partners in restating that our sanctions against Russia for its invasion of eastern Ukraine will remain until Russia fully implements its commitments under the Minsk agreements.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.