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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 Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Michele Siders
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 3, 2018

Mr. Chair, with growing concern we have watched the security situation around the Donetsk Filtration Station deteriorate over the past few weeks. The conflict jeopardizes the supply of clean water, and subjects thousands to the risk of inhaling poisonous chlorine gas stored at the station. It is unconscionable that the SMM continues to record regular ceasefire violations in the area, forcing station employees to hide in an underground shelter, less than two weeks after five employees were shot while leaving their shift. 350,000 people on both sides of the line of contact depend on the Donetsk Filtration Station for clean water. Both sides must uphold the security guarantees they provided on April 22. We again call on Russia to rejoin the JCCC without further delay.

The instigator and driver of this four-year-old conflict is Russia. Its claim that it is not a party to the conflict is laughable. The tragic toll of over 10,300 killed, and 25,000 wounded, is the direct result of Russia's deliberate aggression, and Moscow's continued military, political, and financial backing of proxies in eastern Ukraine. In deliberate disregard of yet another in a long series of ceasefire agreements, Russia continues to fight, despite the Easter recommitment to the ceasefire. Between April 24 and 26, Ukrainian forces suffered more casualties than in any 72-hour period since July 2017.

Although Russia portrays itself as the protector of the Russian-speaking minority of eastern Ukraine, these very people shoulder the heavy burden of Russia's aggression: death, destruction and isolation. The United States strongly urges Russia to cooperate with Ukraine and the international community on measures to safeguard the Donetsk Filtration Station and other key civilian infrastructure sites to prevent radioactive substances within the Yunkom mine from entering the water supply. The United States also supports the call for an international assessment of the situation.

Mr. Chair, there is no doubting Russia's direct involvement in this conflict. On April 19, the OSCE Border Observation Mission spotted a small van crossing the border into Russia bearing the sign "Cargo 200" in Russian – a well-known code-word for Russian military casualties on board. This is far from the first such incident. Since the border monitoring mission was established, observers have tracked over two dozen such crossings at the two crossing points where they are stationed. Consider, colleagues, how many more unauthorized crossings have occurred where the observers are not allowed to see.

Russia not only puts blinders on OSCE observers on the Ukraine-Russia border, but systematically harasses, threatens, and restricts the Special Monitoring Mission. Russia's proxies regularly fire on SMM unmanned aerial vehicles. Monitors continue to be restricted in the Luhansk border area. On three separate occasions last week, small arms were fired near the SMM's position on non-government controlled territory. And on April 28, Russia-led forces threatened to detain monitors and seize their equipment. Threats to the SMM and the targeting of its technical monitoring assets are categorically unacceptable. These actions are deliberate attempts to prevent the SMM from fulfilling its mandate.

It is clear that Russia-led forces are acting with flagrant disregard for their Minsk commitments. The SMM identified 81 prohibited heavy weapons on Russia-held territory last week alone – six times as many as on territory held by the Ukrainian government, despite numerous attempts to obstruct the SMM. Russia concurred with the standing-up of the Mission and its reauthorization these four years. The brave, unarmed monitors – whose dedication is witnessed every day – come from our own states. When Russia or its proxies fire at monitors, they are firing at our citizens.

Continued harassment and abuses of ethnic Tatar and Ukrainian activists constitute another contravention of Russia's OSCE commitments. The United States is deeply concerned about the critical condition of Uzeir Abdullaev, one of over a dozen Crimean Tatars facing charges of belonging to Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an Islamic group that is legal in Ukraine. According to his relatives, Mr. Abdullaev is suffering from a serious blood infection. We remind Russia that we expect it to provide adequate medical care for those in its custody.

The United States also remains concerned about Volodymyr Balukh, who is still on hunger strike and has reportedly been remanded to a 'punishment cell.' We are concerned by credible reports that four people died in April under suspicious circumstances in Simferopol's Pre-Trial Detention Center #1, where Mr. Balukh is held, including two Crimean Tatars. Occupation authorities have purportedly concluded that all of these deaths were suicides. Given prior allegations of torture, or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, poor conditions, and other abuses at this facility, we call on Russian occupation authorities to conduct a thorough and independent investigation into these deaths.

In closing, Mr. Chair, Russia's conduct in Ukraine undermines the core principles, values, and ideals of the OSCE, and poses a threat to the OSCE, its participating States, and our common security. Let me reiterate that the United States fully supports Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. We do not, nor will we ever, recognize Russia's purported annexation of Crimea. Crimea-related sanctions on Russia will remain in place until Russia returns full control of the peninsula to Ukraine. And we join our European and other partners in restating that our sanctions against Russia for its aggression in eastern Ukraine will remain until Russia fully implements its commitments under the Minsk agreements.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.