

Merkel's Spokesman Raps Russia After Report on Aid to Ukraine Rebels

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The  **Moscow Times**

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman accused Moscow on Friday of actively stoking the conflict in eastern Ukraine after a senior separatist in the region was quoted as saying the rebels were receiving "a lot" of Russian money.

Igor Martinov, the rebel-appointed administrative chief of Donetsk, the region's largest city, told Germany's Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung daily that Moscow was helping to finance public services and state pay and pensions no longer funded by the Ukrainian government in Kiev.

"The Russian Federation is helping us," Martinov said, adding that it was "not just a bit of money but a lot."

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied aiding the separatists.

Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said Martinov's remarks confirmed what Western governments and Kiev have been saying for many months about Moscow's involvement in the

crisis.

"Russia is acting in Ukraine without consulting the Ukrainian government, and it is supporting the separatists there very actively," Seibert told a regular news conference.

"Without Russia's military and financial support we simply wouldn't have the violent separatism that we are currently experiencing in these regions."

Martinov did not give numbers but said the Russian transfers had been arriving since the summer and were funding schools, emergency services, pensions and other administrative costs.

Ukraine cut all state funding to the rebel-held areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions after the separatists held elections on November 2 which Kiev and the West condemned as illegal and a violation of a September cease-fire agreement.

The conflict in Ukraine has plunged relations between Russia and the West into crisis, sparking waves of financial and trade sanctions and talk of a new Cold War. More than 4,300 combatants and civilians have died in eastern Ukraine since April and nearly a million people have fled the area.

Germany, Russia's biggest trade partner in the West, has backed dialogue during the crisis but Merkel has recently hardened her rhetoric. After talks in Moscow and Kiev this week, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said there was "no reason" for optimism over the standoff.

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