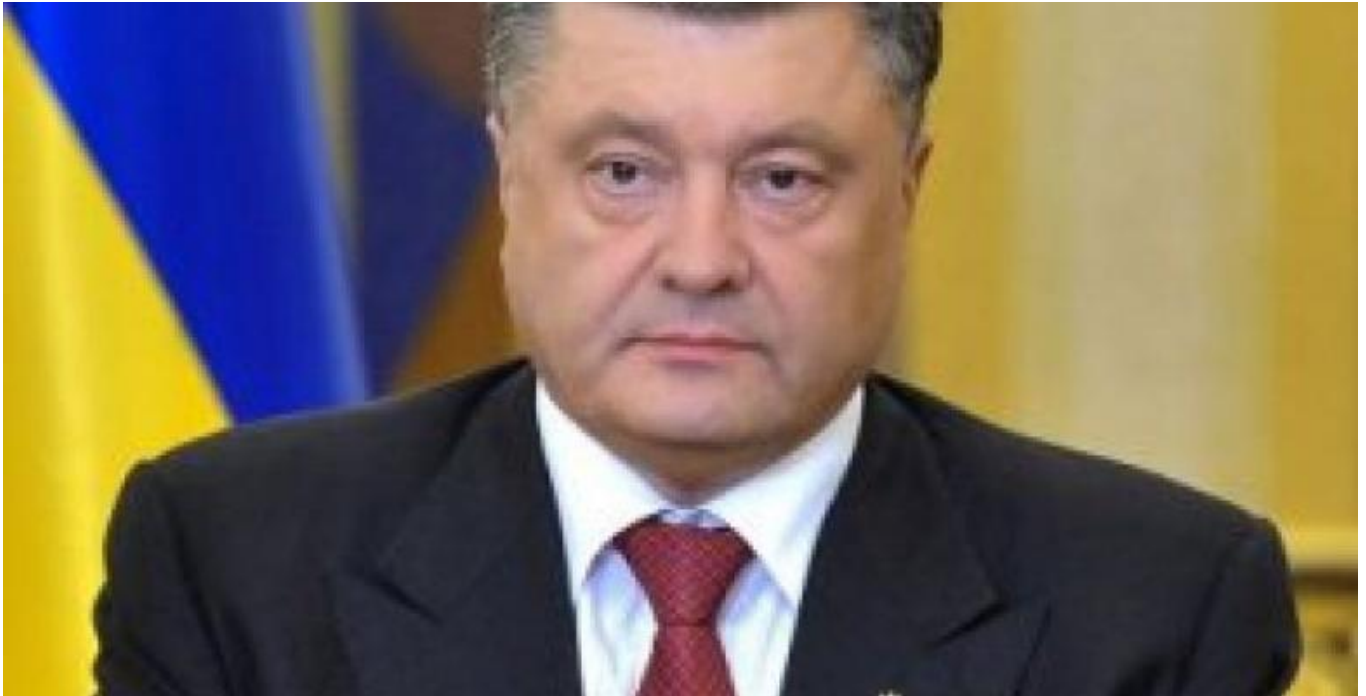

Poroshenko pledges diplomatic efforts for truce in eastern Ukraine

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Speaking at a press conference, Poroshenko said he would meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande on Jan. 15 in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, to discuss ways out of the crisis that has claimed more than 4,700 lives since April.

"There is no military solution to this conflict," he said, adding peace in eastern Ukraine should be established through negotiations, and that Kiev is ready to hold discussions on the issue with its western and eastern partners.

The pledge for diplomacy came after at least three government soldiers and 14 anti-government troops were killed earlier in the day in the battles near the airport of Donetsk city, breaking days of relative calm.

Violence has eased significantly in eastern Ukraine since a truce was brokered on Sept. 5 between Kiev and anti-government forces following talks among Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation.

Kiev will fully implement the ceasefire deal to achieve long- term stability and durable truce in eastern regions, the president said.

At the press conference, Poroshenko also signed into law a bill abandoning the country's non-aligned status, paving the way for Kiev to seek NATO membership.

Although Ukraine has declared its course toward deepening cooperation with the military alliance, it is unlikely for it to be accepted as a NATO member until the confrontation in its eastern territories ebbed, experts said.

To enhance Ukraine's security and defense capabilities, Kiev will launch a wide-ranging reform of its armed forces to bring it closer to the NATO standards, Poroshenko said.

Ukrainian troops have been fighting with anti-government fighters in eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions for more than eight months in a conflict where more than 4,700 people have been killed and over 10,000 wounded.
