A Russian humanitarian mission started toward eastern Ukraine after the U.S. warned President Vladimir Putin not to use aid as a cover to send in troops.

A convoy of 280 trucks carrying 2,000 metric tons of donated food, medicine and drinking water is heading to rebel-held areas of Ukraine from the Moscow region, Itar-Tass reported, citing the regional administration. State television showed trucks labeled “humanitarian aid” setting off. Neither the regional government nor the Emergencies Ministry would immediately comment on who is organizing the transportation.

The U.S., the European Union and NATO reiterated warnings yesterday to Putin that a planned aid mission can’t be a pretext for military intervention in support of pro-Russian separatists. Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, said the army wouldn’t be involved, RIA Novosti newswire repored. Ukraine rejected a rebel offer of a cease-fire two days ago.

The situation in the city of Luhansk and other areas “is critical -- thousands of people are reported to be without access to water, electricity and medical aid,” Laurent Corbaz, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross’s operations for Europe, said in an e-mailed statement late yesterday. Still, “the practical details of this operation need to be clarified before this initiative can move forward.”

The ICRC met with Ukrainian and Russian authorities and passed on documents specifying the manner in which such an operation could take place, the Geneva-based organization said. One requirement is that all sides must guarantee the security of Red Cross staff and vehicles for the duration of the operation, because the ICRC does not accept armed escorts.

Attention may shift today to Ukraine’s parliament, where lawmakers will vote on imposing sanctions against Russian companies.

Deepest Rift

Still, the arrival of an aid mission may ease tensions after months of fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions between government forces and the rebels. The conflict has left hundreds dead and created the deepest rift between Russia and the U.S. and its allies since the end of the Cold War.

Ukraine’s military said yesterday it’s near the end of its operation to encircle the remaining separatist strongholds and called on civilians to leave Donetsk and Luhansk as government troops close in.
The fighting is causing havoc in the residential areas where it’s now concentrated. Luhansk, where about half of the 500,000 population remains, is completely isolated, with electricity cut off in the center and people without phone connections, food, medication or fuel, the city council said on its website. Encirclement of the rebels would shut off routes to the Russian border and sever their supply lines.

‘Emergency Operations’

“I hope that our Western partners won’t put a spanner in the works and will think about the people who desperately need supplies of electricity and water to resume, elementary medicines to be available in hospitals so children can have emergency operations,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi.

U.S. President Barack Obama backed the plan for an aid mission in a phone call, his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko, said in a statement on his website.

Russia’s Micex equities index rose 1.8 percent in Moscow yesterday, the most in six weeks on speculation the tension is easing. The gauge was little changed as of 10:15 a.m.

Putin discussed the planned aid convoy with European Commission President Jose Barroso in a phone call yesterday.

“President Putin told President Barroso that the Russian side would cooperate with international humanitarian organizations to deliver the aid,” Michael Jennings, a spokesman for the Brussels-based commission, said in an e-mail.

‘Any Pretext’

The EU said in a statement that Barroso warned the Russian leader “against any unilateral military actions in Ukraine, under any pretext, including humanitarian.”

Barroso also “expressed concern at the gathering of Russian troops near the Ukrainian border, as well as the continuing flow of arms, equipment and militants from Russian territory, which run counter to efforts towards de-escalating the crisis,” according to the statement.

“We see the Russians developing the narrative and the pretext for such an operation under the guise of a humanitarian operation and we see a military buildup that could be used to conduct such illegal military operations in Ukraine,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in an interview with Reuters.

The massing of soldiers and the threats of unilateral humanitarian aid delivery are potentially very dangerous and destabilizing, a senior U.S. State Department official said yesterday on condition of anonymity, citing policy.

“Putin wants to liquidate Ukraine as an independent state and is looking for a good excuse for it,” Vadim Grechaninov, who heads the Atlantic Council of Ukraine, a military research group, said by
phone. “But it seems now it’s not the best moment for him: a humanitarian mission does not provide the excuse.”

**‘Pushing Ahead’**

Inhabitants of Donetsk and Luhansk, which were home to 1.5 million people before the pro-Russian insurgency began, should leave via humanitarian corridors, Ukrainian military spokesman Andriy Lysenko told reporters in Kiev.

“The operation to encircle these cities is almost over,” he said. “The active operation continues day and night. We’re pushing ahead and aren’t stopping.”

As the crisis intensified, the government in Moscow responded to sanctions last week by banning Ukrainian, American and EU food imports.

Ukraine, which stopped receiving Russian gas in June while acting as a conduit for supplies to Europe, may hit back at the Russian sanctions with a “complete or partial” ban on energy shipments, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said last week.

State-owned NAK Naftogaz Ukrainy said in an e-mailed statement yesterday it may ban gas transit by certain companies, a step that might force European purchasers to buy natural gas at the Russian frontier. Russia has said it will retaliate if new measures against it are approved.

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