

Shellfire as Putin Turns Up Heat on Ukraine and West

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February 18, 2022



A woman stands among debris after the reported shelling of a kindergarten in the city of Stanytsia Luhanska, Ukraine. **Aris Messinis / AFP**

Shellfire rang out in eastern Ukraine on Friday as Kyiv and Washington accused Russia of seeking to provoke an incident to falsely justify an invasion and Moscow-backed rebels said they were evacuating civilians from their breakaway enclave.

An AFP reporter near the frontline between government forces and rebel-held territory in the Lugansk region heard the thud of explosions and saw damaged civilian buildings.

All eyes were on Russian President Vladimir Putin's next move as Moscow announced he will oversee a weekend drill of "strategic forces" — ballistic and cruise missiles.

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"Right now we are seeing a deterioration of the situation," Putin said at a press conference with his Belarus counterpart Alexander Lukashenko in Moscow.

Russia has demanded that the United States withdraw all forces from NATO members in central and eastern Europe and is turning up the pressure on Ukraine.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the Munich Security Conference that what has happened "in the last 24-48 hours is part of a scenario that is already in place of creating false provocations, of then having to respond to those provocations and then ultimately committing new aggression against Ukraine."

Russia has denied it has any such plan and claims to have begun withdrawing some of the 149,000 troops that Ukraine says are on its borders.

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But Putin has done nothing to dial down tensions, ordering the missile drills even as there are reports of an increase in shelling from Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine.

The separatist leader of eastern Ukraine's self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic said rebel authorities will begin evacuating civilians to Russia on Friday.

"Women, children and the elderly are subject to be evacuated first," Denis Pushilin said.

Visiting Poland, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Washington was seeing "more" Russian forces moving into the Ukraine border region despite Moscow's announcements.

U.S. President Joe Biden is to hold video talks with Western allies, including the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany and NATO, later on Friday to discuss the crisis.

On Thursday, a shell punched a hole in the wall of a kindergarten in government-held territory near the frontline in the Ukrainian village of Stanytsia Luganska.

Invasion pretext

The 20 children and 18 adults inside escaped serious injury but the attack sparked international howls of protest.

"The children were eating breakfast when it hit," school laundry worker Natalia Slesareva told AFP at the scene.

"It hit the gym. After breakfast, the children had gym class. So, another 15 minutes, and everything could have been much, much worse."

On Friday, part of the village remained without electricity. Konstantin Reutsky, director of the Vostok SOS aid agency, told AFP that houses and a shop had been damaged.

The Ukrainian joint command center said the rebels had violated the ceasefire 45 times

between midnight and 2:00 p.m. Friday, while the Donetsk and Lugansk separatist groups said the army had fired 27 times in the morning.

"There are no losses among the military personnel of the joint forces as a result of enemy actions," the Ukrainian command center said, accusing the rebels of firing artillery from civilian population areas.

"Ukrainian defenders returned fire to stop enemy activity only in case of a threat to the lives of servicemen."

The conflict in Ukraine's east has rumbled on for eight years, claiming the lives of more than 14,000 people and forcing more than 1.5 million from their homes.

But now, after Russia surrounded its neighbor with armored battle groups, missile batteries and warships, there are fears that Ukraine will be drawn into a clash that Russia could use as a pretext for invasion.

Speaking in parliament, Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov insisted government forces would keep their cool.

"Ukraine is stepping up its defenses. But we have no intention of conducting military operations" against the separatists or Russian-annexed Crimea, he said.

'Keep a cool head'

"Our mission is not to do any of the things the Russians are trying to provoke us into doing," Reznikov added. "We have to push back but keep a cool head."

The Russian Defense Ministry further upped the ante by announcing that Putin would on Saturday oversee an "exercise of strategic deterrence forces... during which ballistic and cruise missiles will be launched."

The air force, units of the southern military district, as well as the Northern and Black Sea fleets would be involved.

Russia's aggressive stance has sent diplomatic shockwaves through the West, scrambling to counter an unpredictable foe during what has been described as the worst threat to European security since the Cold War.

Leaders of the Group of Seven wealthy nations will hold a virtual conference next Thursday with the Ukraine crisis high on the agenda, Germany, which holds the group's rotating presidency, said Friday.

Opening the Munich Security Conference German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said Russia is making an "absolutely unacceptable threat" with its troop build up.

"This crisis is therefore not a Ukraine crisis. It is a Russia crisis. We urge Russia to withdraw its troops immediately," she said.

"Initial signals to this effect were a glimmer of hope, but we need to see action now. Because

the Russian threat remains real."

UN chief Antonio Guterres told the opening ceremony that if the crisis escalates into a war "it would be catastrophic."

"With a concentration of Russian troops around Ukraine, I am deeply concerned about heightened tensions and increased speculation about a military conflict in Europe," he said.

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