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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine Minister Dives for Cover as Frontline Heats Up

By AFP and Thibault Marchand for AFP

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The Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces, the military reserve of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, take part in a military drill outside Kyiv on Feb. 19, 2022. **Sergei SUPINSKY / AFP**

Bent in a semi-crouch Ukraine's interior minister ran back from an exposed frontline position, as mortar shells crashed in the fields around him.

Just minutes earlier, Denys Monastyrsky had told reporters: "We are ready for any scenario at any time."

On Saturday, the scenario was a surprise mortar barrage after he met troops and inspected trenches and bunkers outside Novoluganske, in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine.

The message for the accompanying journalists was that Moscow-backed forces are stepping up attacks along the eight-year-old frontline, amid the growing menace of a full-scale Russian invasion.

But the threat was obvious.

As the minister, dressed in camouflage fatigues and a military helmet, walked back up an exposed road lined with abandoned vehicles, shells whistled through the air and exploded in nearby fields.

Monastyrsky, his escorts and reporters scrambled for cover before running back up the road to their vehicles. No one was hurt, and the official would later say that he thought the army, not he, was the target.

But the incident underlined the danger of escalation in a conflict that has already left 14,000 dead and could now, if U.S. intelligence is to be believed, become an international war.

The separatist rebels across the frontline from the position visited by Monastyrsky accuse Kyiv of plotting an offensive to recapture the enclave they hold in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk.

But it is Ukraine which complains that it is under attack — two soldiers were killed on Saturday — and President Joe Biden says U.S. intelligence indicates that Russia plans to invade.

One of the dead, 35-year-old Captain Anton Sidorov and father-of-three, was shot dead near Novoluganske, scene of the minister's shelling incident.

If the more than 150,000 Russian soldiers Kyiv and Washington say are massed on the border do launch an assault, they will have to pass through frontline communities like Novoluganske.

Andriy, a 26-year-old infantryman from the city of Kharkiv, is based here, and confirmed that the situation is "heating up."

"The situation is even worse than yesterday, they've been firing 152 mm heavy artillery," he told AFP. "There are wounded in several battalions."

There were 4,000 people in the town before the conflict erupted, isolated by potholed roads and now by minefields marked by little painted red posts.

Only 3 kilometers (less than 2 miles) from the rebel frontline, the town lives in a sort of no-man's land and many of the homes have been abandoned.

"We're not afraid," boasts 10-year-old Ruslan, wandering with his German Shepherd and a few friends between the ruined city stadium and the Ukrainian army command post.

Elena Valerievna, the 50-year-old owner of a small grocery store, is less afraid to admit that recent days have been a trial.

"It's been a long time since there was such a bombardment," she said. "I wish there was peace, calm, tranquility. That's what I want, not war, but I fear that's impossible."

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