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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine Puts Off Evacuation of Key Port Besieged by Russian Forces

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Mariupol, Ukraine **UNIAN**

The Ukrainian port city of Mariupol delayed a planned evacuation of residents Saturday, blaming Russian forces for breaking their temporary ceasefire to allow civilians to flee one of the war's fiercest battles.

Russia has besieged the strategic city, which proudly resisted Moscow-backed rebels during a 2014 conflict, cutting off electricity, food and water in the dead of winter.

"Due to the fact that the Russian side does not adhere to the ceasefire and has continued shelling both Mariupol itself and its environs, and for security reasons, the evacuation of the civilian population has been postponed," city officials said in a statement posted on social media.

Civilians who gathered to leave were told to return to shelters.

Negotiations were underway "to establish a ceasefire and ensure a safe humanitarian corridor," Mariupol authorities added.

An evacation had been seen as a prelude to a final assault that, if successful, would see the Russian army push north from occupied Crimea and link up with their forces from the east and take control of Ukraine's coast on the Sea of Azov.

After Russia's defense ministry declared a ceasefire to allow humanitarian corridors out of Mariupol and neighboring Volnovakha, officials announced that the port city's 450,000-strong population could begin to leave by bus and private cars.

Mariupol mayor Vadim Boychenko said: "This is not an easy decision, but ... Mariupol is not its streets or houses. Mariupol is its population, it is you and me."

An aid worker in Mariupol for Doctors Without Borders said: "Last night the shelling was harder and closer. We collected snow and rain water yesterday... We tried to get free water today but the queue was huge."

The Mariupol siege came as more Russian forces inched closer to the capital Kyiv, encountering stiff resistance and shelling the western suburbs and the northern town of Chernihiv, where there have been heavy civilian casualties in recent days.

Scenes of devastation

AFP reporters who visited the town on Saturday saw scenes of devastation — despite Moscow's insistence it is not targeting civilian areas.

Fears are rising in Kyiv that the capital will suffer the same fate once Russian missile artillery is deployed within range.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov alleged that Russia had changed tactics after encountering tough resistance.

Ukraine, he said, had defeated Russia's plan to quickly storm major cities and overthrow President Volodymyr Zelensky's government, forcing Moscow to resort to "cowardly" attacks on civilians.

Zelensky remains defiant and announced on Saturday that Ukrainian forces were counter-attacking around Kharkiv, the country's second largest city, which has seen incursions by Russian forces and fierce bombardments.

"Ukrainian armed forces bravely hold all the key areas of our defense," he declared. "We inflict such losses on the invaders that they have not seen even in their worst dream."

Since Putin's army invaded on Feb. 24, Russia has pummelled Ukrainian cities, with officals reporting hundreds of civilians killed. Europe's largest atomic power plant has even come under attack sparking fears of a catastrophic nuclear accident.

But Moscow has so far only seized two key cities in its 10-day-long invasion —Berdiansk and Kherson on Ukraine's southern Black Sea coast.

Capturing Mariupol represents a bigger prize for Russian forces as it would deal a severe blow to Ukraine's maritime access and connect with troops coming from annexed Crimea and the Donbas.

The Kremlin said late Friday that Moscow was waiting for a third round of talks with Ukraine in Belarus, and one of Kyiv's negotiators said it hoped to hold them this weekend.

"The third leg could take place tomorrow or the day after, we are in constant contact," Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said Friday.

In a Kyiv hospital, wounded soldiers told AFP of their grim battle against the Russian advance, and vowed to return to the frontline.

"We were on reconnaissance and came across an enemy column that had made a breakthrough," said Motyka, 29, who was hit by shrapnel.

"We fought them and killed their soldiers on foot, but they showered us with mortar fire."

Zelensky was to appeal to Washington for more assistance Saturday with an address to the U.S. Senate after some lawmakers urged President Joe Biden to take tougher measures, including banning Russia's oil imports.

No no-fly zone

Zelensky had earlier criticized NATO for ruling out imposing a no-fly zone, saying the Western military alliance had essentially given "the green light for further bombing of Ukrainian cities and villages."

With fears growing of direct conflict between Western forces and Russia — both nuclear armed — the U.S. and Moscow have set up a new direct phone line to reduce the risks of "miscalculation," the Pentagon said Friday.

Russian forces attacked and seized the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant on Friday, pushing Kyiv to accuse Moscow of "nuclear terror."

Ukrainian monitors say there has been no spike in radiation after a fire in a training facility.

Moscow denied it had shelled the plant.

Media exodus

Russian authorities have imposed a news blackout and several media outlets have halted operations.

Multiple media websites were partially inaccessible in Russia. Twitter was restricted and Facebook blocked.

The BBC and Bloomberg said they were suspending work in Russia after lawmakers in Moscow passed legislation to impose fines and jail terms of up to 15 years for publishing "fake news" about the army.

CNN said it would halt broadcasting in Russia, while independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta said it would remove Ukraine content.

The Kremlin on Saturday defended the new law, saying it was "necessary as the country was facing "an unprecedented information war."

Global hunger

Putin has been unmoved as Russia has become isolated in economic, sporting and cultural fields.

But UN prosecutors at The Hague are investigating a possible war crime in Kharkiv, where authorities say residential areas were indiscriminately shelled.

The UN says more than 1.2 million refugees have flooded into neighboring countries.

The global body's food agency warned the conflict will create a food crisis in Ukraine and worsen global food insecurity, with Moscow and Kyiv providing around 29% of the global wheat trade.

"The bullets and bombs in Ukraine could take the global hunger crisis to levels beyond anything we've seen before," said agency director David Beasley.

At the Winter Paralympics in Beijing, Ukrainian athletes overcame all the hurdles to hit the top of the medal table with a haul of seven on day one.

In the men's vision-impaired biathlon race, Vitalii Lukianenko took gold and said: "I want to dedicate this medal to the guys who protect our cities."

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