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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Threatens Ukraine 'Statehood' as Moscow Sanctions Tighten

By Dave Clark for AFP

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“They are putting in question the future of Ukrainian statehood," Putin said on Saturday. **Mikhail Klimentyev/Russian Presidential Press and Information Office/TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened the existence of Ukrainian statehood as his army's invasion of the neighbor faces stiff resistance Sunday and his economy is increasingly asphyxiated by sanctions.

In the latest efforts to freeze Moscow out of the world economy, U.S.-based card payment giants Visa and Mastercard announced they will suspend operations in Russia, while world leaders vowed to act over the intensifying onslaught.

"The current (Ukrainian) authorities must understand that if they continue to do what they are doing, they are putting in question the future of Ukrainian statehood," Putin said on Saturday.

"And if this happens, they will be fully responsible."

Since Russia's invasion 10 days ago, the economic and humanitarian toll of the war has spiralled, sending more than one million people fleeing Ukraine. Officials have reported hundreds of civilians killed and thousands wounded.

In a Facebook post on Sunday the Ukrainian military said it was engaged in "fierce battles" with Russian forces for the control of borders at the southern city of Mykolaiv and the Chernihiv in the north.

"The main efforts are focused on defending the city of Mariupol," it said, adding an operation by Ukrainian forces was also under way in the eastern part of the Donetsk region.

Mariupol officials said it would begin efforts from noon on Sunday to evacuate its civilian population, after earlier efforts were scuppered by ceasefire violations.

"From 12:00 (10:00 GMT) the evacuation of the civilian population begins," city officials said in a statement, which said a ceasefire was agreed with Russian-led forces surrounding the city.

The strategic city of Mariupol on the Azov Sea has for days been under siege and without electricity, food and water, with stop-start ceasefires.

Its mayor Vadim Boitchenko said in an interview published on YouTube "Mariupol no longer exists" and that thousands of people have been wounded.

"The situation is very difficult," he said. "I ask our American and European partners: help us, save Mariupol."

Planes appeal

Kyiv has urged the West to boost military assistance to the besieged country, including warplanes, with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy pleading for Eastern European neighbors to provide Russian-made planes that his pilots are trained to fly.

Several U.S. media reported Washington is working on a deal with Warsaw in which Poland would send Soviet-era aircraft to Ukraine in return for American F-16 fighter jets.

Putin meanwhile escalated warnings against NATO, threatening a wider war if a no-fly zone is set up.

While Zelenskiy criticized NATO for ruling out the no-fly zone, Putin spoke of "colossal and catastrophic consequences not only for Europe but also the whole world" if such a step was taken.

"Any movement in this direction will be considered by us as participation in an armed conflict by that country," Putin said.

Hitting out at stiffening Western sanctions, the Russian leader said: "A lot of what we're coming up against right now is a way of waging war against Russia.

"The sanctions against Russia are akin to a declaration of war. But thank God we're not at that point yet."

Putin also dismissed rumors that the Kremlin was planning to declare martial law in Russia.

Cards cut

Visa and Mastercard both announced they will suspend operations in Russia, the latest major American firms to join the business freeze-out of Moscow.

Mastercard said it made the decision over the "unprecedented nature of the current conflict and the uncertain economic environment."

Visa meanwhile said that "effective immediately" it would "work with its clients and partners within Russia to cease all Visa transactions over the coming days."

Visa and Mastercard had already announced that they were complying with US and international sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its attack.

But Russia's major banks — including its largest lender Sberbank and the Russia Central Bank — downplayed the effect the cards' suspensions would have on their clients.

The war has already had serious global economic impacts, with the IMF warning that its effects would be "all the more devastating" should the conflict escalate.

Russia's business and other contacts with the West have been steadily cut. Moscow has suspended all flights by flagship carrier Aeroflot, effective Tuesday.

Frenzied diplomacy

As frantic, top-level diplomatic talks continued, Zelenskiy announced on Sunday that he spoke by phone with his U.S. counterpart Joe Biden to discuss financial support and sanctions against Russia.

"The agenda included the issues of security, financial support for Ukraine and the continuation of sanctions against Russia," Zelenskiy tweeted.

Hours earlier, the Ukrainian leader had addressed U.S. lawmakers by video call, pleading for further funding and an embargo on Russian oil imports.

The American legislators promised an additional $10 billion aid package, but the White House has so far ruled out an oil ban, fearing it would ratchet up prices and hurt U.S. consumers already stung by record inflation.

Weapons, ammunition and funds have poured into Ukraine from Western allies as they seek to bolster Kyiv against Moscow's invasion.

Washington last week authorised $350 million of military equipment — the largest such package in U.S. history.

While visiting Ukrainian refugees on the Polish border over the weekend, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington was seeking $2.75 billion for the unfurling humanitarian crisis as nearly 1.4 million civilians have fled.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett made a surprise visit to the Kremlin Saturday for three hours of talks — Putin's first face-to-face meeting with a foreign leader since the invasion began.

The Israeli leader later spoke with Zelenskiy.

Kyiv had asked Israel — which has strong relations with both Russia and Ukraine — to launch a dialogue with Moscow.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's office said he is to launch an international "plan of action" to ensure Russia's invasion of Ukraine fails, including a flurry of diplomatic meetings next week.

Closer to Kyiv

Russian forces have been inching closer to the capital Kyiv in an assault that has become ever-more indiscriminate — and deadly.

Working-class towns such as Bucha and Irpin are in the line of fire, and air raids Friday broke many people's resolve to stay.

"They are bombing residential areas — schools, churches, big buildings, everything," said accountant Natalia Dydenko, glancing back at the destruction she was leaving behind.

Dozens of civilians have been killed in Chernihiv. Those remaining live in craters or among ruins.

"There were corpses all over the ground," a man who gave his name only as Sergei told AFP, as air raid sirens wailed. "They were queueing here for the pharmacy that's just there, and they're all dead."

AFP reporters saw scenes of devastation — despite Moscow's insistence it is not targeting civilian areas.

A defiant Zelensky said Saturday that Ukrainian forces were counterattacking around Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city, inflicting "such losses on the invaders that they have not seen even in their worst dream."

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was equally defiant, saying, "Ukraine is bleeding, but Ukraine has not fallen, and stands both feet on the ground... The myth of the unbeatable and almighty Russian army is already ruined."

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