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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Strikes Hit West Ukraine as U.S. Urges China to Get Tough

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Smoke rises after an explosion in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv on March 18, 2022. Russian forces on March 18 destroyed an aircraft repair plant in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. **Yuriy Dyachyshyn / AFP**

Russian missiles struck close to Lviv's airport in Ukraine's far west Friday, extending the war to a relatively unscathed region near NATO territory, as China came under U.S. pressure to restrain its Kremlin allies.

Ambulance and police vehicles raced to the scene of the early-morning strike on an aircraft repair plant near the border of NATO member Poland — which has seen more than two million refugees cross over from Ukraine.

Motorists were turned away at checkpoints and a thick pall of smoke billowed over the airport, an AFP reporter saw, although officials said the plant was inactive and there were no fatalities.

Located 70 kilometers (45 miles) from the border, Lviv had until now largely escaped assault by Russian forces, and it has become a rear base for foreign diplomats fleeing Ukraine's capital Kyiv.

"This was a strike on the city of Lviv, on a humanitarian hub where more than 200,000 people have been displaced," regional governor Maksym Kozytsky told reporters.

Valentin Vovchenko, 82, told AFP in Lviv: "We fled Kyiv because of the attacks but now they've started to hit here."

Related article: Russian Missiles Destroy Aircraft Repair Plant in Ukraine's Lviv – Mayor

As President Vladimir Putin's three-week-old ground offensive has stalled under fierce Ukrainian resistance, Moscow has increasingly turned to indiscriminate air and long-range strikes.

In the besieged southern city of Mariupol, rescue workers have been searching for any survivors buried beneath the rubble of a bombed-out theatre, amid fears hundreds may be trapped.

Russia said its troops and their separatist allies were fighting in the center of the strategic port city.

Authorities in Kyiv said one person was killed when a downed Russian rocket struck a residential building in the capital's northern suburbs. They said a school and playground were also hit.

Russians lack 'basic essentials'

In the hard-pressed eastern city of Kharkiv, Russian strikes demolished the six-story building of a higher education institution, killing one person and leaving another trapped in the wreckage, officials said.

Britain's defense ministry said that on the ground, Russia was struggling to resupply its forward troops "with even basic essentials such as food and fuel."

"Incessant Ukrainian counterattacks are forcing Russia to divert large number of troops to defend their own supply lines. This is severely limiting Russia's offensive potential," it said.

President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Ukraine's resistance had killed thousands of invading troops, as he addressed Russian mothers in his latest video message.

"We didn't want this war. We only want peace," he said. "And we want you to love your children more than you fear your authorities."

In a call later Friday, U.S. President Joe Biden was to warn his counterpart Xi Jinping that China would face "costs" for "any actions it takes to support Russia's aggression," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

After accusing Putin of being a "war criminal," Biden hopes China will use "whatever leverage they have to compel Moscow to end this war," the top U.S. diplomat said.

"Intentionally targeting civilians is a war crime," Blinken added in the wake of the Mariupol theatre attack.

'It is hell'

Ukraine's ombudswoman Lyudmyla Denisova said a bomb shelter underneath the Drama Theatre had survived the impact, and some "adults and children" had emerged alive.

The attack on a civilian building marked with the words "DETI," or "children" in Russian, sparked a wave of international revulsion and heaped pressure on Russia's few remaining allies — notably China.

But Beijing has refused to oppose Russia at the United Nations, or even to use word the "invasion" three weeks into the war, while stressing its opposition to the West's punishing sanctions on Moscow.

Russia did withdraw a UN Security Council vote on a "humanitarian" resolution on Ukraine, scheduled for Friday, due to a lack of support from China and India, diplomats said.

Moscow's diplomatic isolation deepened as Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania announced the expulsion of 10 Russian diplomats, following in the steps of Bulgaria.

Condemning the West's sanctions, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the United States of seeking to remake the world in its own image.

"They are trying to take the melting pot concept from the United States' soil and to make the melting pot from the entire world, and they would be the melters," he said in English on Russia's RT channel — which was Friday banned in Britain.

Essential services have already melted down in Mariupol.

Local officials say more than 2,000 people have died so far in indiscriminate shelling of the city, and 80% of its housing has been destroyed.

"In the streets, there are the bodies of many dead civilians," Tamara Kavunenko, 58, told AFP after fleeing the city.

"It's not Mariupol anymore," she said. "It is hell."

Historically, Ukraine has been a grain-exporting breadbasket to the world.

But the "devastating human catastrophe" now unfolding risks "extensive" economic fallout around the world, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and other top global lenders warned.

"The entire global economy will feel the effects of the crisis through slower growth, trade disruptions, and steeper inflation," they said.

'Odessa holding on'

For many Ukrainians, Russia's actions on the ground and from the air make a mockery of stop-start peace talks that have been proceeding this week.

In a call with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin on Friday accused Ukrainian authorities of "trying in every possible way to stall negotiations, putting forward more and more unrealistic proposals."

"Nevertheless, the Russian side is ready to continue to search for solutions in line with its well-known principled approaches," he said, according to the Kremlin.

Russia wants Ukraine to disarm and disavow all Western alliances — steps that Kyiv says would return it to a vassal state of Moscow.

Western governments have slammed Putin's vision for peace and in Odessa, on the Black Sea, civilians are braced for attack, with tanks deployed at intersections and monuments covered in sandbags.

"Our beautiful Odessa," said Lyudmila, an elegant elderly woman wearing bright lipstick, as she looked forlornly at her city's empty, barricaded streets.

"But thank God we are holding on! Everyone is holding on!"

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