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U.S., U.K. Say Fearful Advisers Mislead Putin on Ukraine War

By AFP

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President Vladimir Putin is being misled by fearful advisers as his Ukraine invasion goes awry, with mutinous Russian troops sabotaging equipment and even accidentally shooting down their own aircraft, U.S. and British intelligence agencies claim.

The close allies, whose spies have played up Russia's failures and highlighted Kremlin divisions, said Putin's advisers were "too afraid" to tell him the full truth about battlefield reverses and the real impact of sanctions.

Hours after the White House released its withering intelligence assessment, Britain's GCHQ spy agency chief Jeremy Fleming said Thursday that the Russian leader had overestimated his military's ability to secure a rapid victory.

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"We've seen Russian soldiers – short of weapons and morale – refusing to carry out orders, sabotaging their own equipment and even accidentally shooting down their own aircraft," Fleming said in a prepared speech to the Australian National University in Canberra.

"And even though Putin's advisers are afraid to tell him the truth, what's going on and the extent of these misjudgements must be crystal clear to the regime."

Fleming said Putin had underestimated the Ukraine resistance, the strength of the international coalition against him, and the impact of economic sanctions.

Putin 'felt misled'

His remarks echoed a White House briefing on declassified U.S. intelligence on Wednesday, which said Putin's relations with his own staff had deteriorated.

"We obviously have information which we have now made public that he felt misled by the Russian military," White House communications director Kate Bedingfield said.

Ukrainian forces have been recapturing territory in recent days – including the strategic Kyiv suburb of Irpin – as the Russian offensive appears to have stalled five weeks after it began on Feb. 24.

It is "pretty obvious" Putin is ill advised, said Marcus Hellyer, defense analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Canberra.

Advisers to authoritarian leaders quickly learn "what the boss wants to hear," he said.

Hellyer said he suspected that Western agencies, as well as trying to explain events, also aimed to sow dissent or feed doubt about Putin's judgement within Russia.

Whatever advice he receives, Putin has more resources to pour into the war and is unlikely to accept a settlement unless he has something "very substantial" to take home to the Russian people, he said.

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"It may be that they have realized they can't completely defeat Ukraine so they are going to adopt a different strategy, which is to occupy all of Donbas, occupy as much of the Black Sea coast as they can and use that as the facts on the ground for their negotiating strategy."

Mistrust of military

The U.S. and British spy reports come as questions mount about Putin's relationship with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who disappeared from public view for weeks before reappearing March 26 in a television broadcast.

Television images showed Shoigu chairing a meeting on Russia's defense procurement. It

carried no date, but the minister referred to a finance ministry meeting the previous day.

There is "persistent tension" between Putin and Moscow's Defense Ministry, stemming from the Russian leader's mistrust in its leadership, a senior U.S. official said in Washington.

Several reports in March suggested a shadowy section of Russia's FSB security agency had come under scrutiny, with its leader interrogated and reportedly even under house arrest.

The reports could not be independently confirmed.

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