

Ukraine Girds for Russian Eastern Onslaught

By [Danny Kemp for AFP](#)

March 31, 2022



A monument to Princess Olga, St. Andrew the First-Called and the educators Cyril and Methodius lined with sandbags. **Chuzakov Sergey / UNIAN**

Ukraine's president warned Russian troops are regrouping in preparation for a renewed assault in the east Thursday, as he dismissed Kremlin promises to scale back attacks on the capital Kyiv.

With shelling of Kyiv and Chernigiv continuing despite a Russian vow to "reduce" military activity by "a large margin," Volodymyr Zelensky told his war-torn nation to brace for a new Russian onslaught in the eastern Donbas region.

"We don't believe anyone, not a single beautiful phrase," Zelensky said in a late-night video message. "There is an accumulation of Russian troops for new strikes in Donbas and we are preparing for it."

"We will fight for every metre of our land," he said.

In five weeks of brutal fighting Russian forces have been humbled by dogged Ukrainian resistance, and forced to rethink any ambitions to sack the capital or overthrow the democratically elected government.

Western intelligence agencies have been keen to underscore Russia's military failings, and to push suggestions that President Vladimir Putin is being misled by his own fearful advisors about battlefield reverses.

"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," Britain's GCHQ spy agency chief Jeremy Fleming on Thursday, after similar claims from the White House.

Citing U.S. intelligence, White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said Putin "felt misled by the Russian military."

Military experts believe that with thousands of Russian troops killed and many thousands more injured, Moscow has no choice but to ditch efforts to advance simultaneously along multiple axes in the north, east and south.

There are growing indications that Russia's focus is turning to the east, and capturing more towns and cities in Donbas including the besieged port city of Mariupol — even as the long-range assault on other cities continues.

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Shift in strategy

Russia's Ministry of Defense on Thursday claimed that was the plan all along.

"The first stage of the special military operation," said major general Igor Konashenkov, was "to force the enemy to concentrate its forces, means, resources and military equipment to hold on to high populated areas."

He said the aim was to degrade and tie up Ukrainian forces so they could not be used "in the main direction of our Armed Forces in Donbas." "All these goals have been met," he added.

Some believe that Russia's aim now will be to capture territory in the south to strengthen Moscow's hand when it comes to negotiating peace.

"I think we are now seeing the Russian strategy changing," said Marcus Hellyer of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a former Department of Defense and intelligence official. "They are focusing more on the east so it may be that they have realized they can't completely defeat Ukraine."

The new strategy, he suggested was "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."

Ukraine's general staff on Thursday reported that some Russian units had already left northwestern Ukraine for Moscow-allied Belarus, and there was a "regrouping" of units of the Eastern Military District.

They also claimed that Russia was preparing to create "another pseudo-republic in the Kherson region."

Since 2014 Russia has backed two similar breakaway Donbas statelets in Luhansk and Donetsk and recently recognized their independence.

The fate of these two self-styled "people's republics" is central to ongoing peace talks, with Kyiv insisting they are still part of Ukraine.

Russia has long sought a land link between the republics and also-occupied Crimea via Mariupol, which is now encircled by Russian forces.

Tens of thousands of civilians are trapped in the city without ready access to food, water or medicines.

Russia's offer of a Mariupol ceasefire from 10:00 am (0700 GMT) Thursday — allowing trapped civilians to leave — was dismissed by Ukrainian authorities as "another manipulation."

Ukrainian ombudswoman Lyudmyla Denisova also accused Russian forces of striking a clearly marked Red Cross facility near the city with aircraft and artillery.

An International Committee of the Red Cross official told AFP the facility was a warehouse but aid stored there had been distributed.

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Civilian toll

As generals and political leaders reassess their strategies for a new phase in the war, the toll on ordinary Ukrainians is still coming into harrowing focus.

In Irpin, a gateway to Kyiv, officials said they were recovering bodies in the streets and the area was still being shelled by Russia.

Irpin's mayor Oleksandr Markushyn said at least 200 people had been killed there since the war began.

In the town of Trostyanets, just 30 kilometers (20 miles) from the Russian border, AFP reporters saw dazed residents emerge from their homes as Ukrainian soldiers salvaged abandoned Russian vehicles.

"There was nothing left to eat in the town, no water and no electricity," said Pavlo, who spent the past month hunkered down in his basement.

The United Nations estimates that 4 million Ukrainians — close to one in 10 inhabitants —

have been forced to flee the country.

The head of the UN Human Rights Council has warned Moscow that "indiscriminate attacks are prohibited under international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes."

There are few signs of those attacks abating, despite recent talks in Istanbul and another round of video talks slated for April 1.

Both sides initially said the Istanbul meeting had made progress, but the Kremlin on Wednesday played down hopes of a breakthrough.

"We cannot state that there was anything too promising," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian was similarly pessimistic, saying "the war continues."

Against that backdrop, Ukraine's Western allies appear ready to step up military aid for Kyiv and sanctions on Russia.

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke of British military aid "going up a gear" and the White House said that President Joe Biden discussed "additional capabilities" in an almost hour-long phone call with Zelensky.

The White House said that could include "anti-ship capability" to hit Russian vessels in the Black Sea.

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