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Ukraine in 'Desperately Important' Rescue Bid for Besieged City

By Danny Kemp for AFP

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Citizens queue for water in Mariupol. **Nikolai Trishin / TASS**

Kyiv said Thursday it was sending dozens of buses to evacuate civilians from the besieged city of Mariupol after a Russian ceasefire announcement, as the international Red Cross said it was ready to lead the "desperately important" operation.

Over a month into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's troops have devastated cities like Mariupol with their incessant shelling, killing at least 5,000 in the port city alone. But they have struggled to take control of any significant territory.

Underscoring Russia's underestimation of Ukraine's dogged defense, Western intelligence agents say Putin is being misled by advisers "afraid to tell him the truth" about battlefield losses or the calamitous damages that sanctions have wrought on the country's economy.

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Moscow this week said it would scale back attacks on capital Kyiv and concentrate on the east, but Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has dismissed the vows as a red herring.

Russian forces were continuing to shell Kyiv and the northern city of Chernigiv, where governor of the region, Vicheslav Chaus, poured scorn on Moscow's claim it was deescalating fighting.

"The enemy is taking losses. It is moving on the territory of Chernigiv region. Can we call that a withdrawal of troops? I am not sure. At the minimum, it is regrouping, but it is possible that it is withdrawing. We must not let down our guard," he wrote on Telegram.

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.

Its focus instead has turned towards the east, and capturing more towns and cities in the Donbas area including Mariupol, while continuing to fire long-range assaults on other cities.

'Desperately important'

Around the capital Kyiv, villages like Lukianivka have borne the brunt of Russia's assaults.

A trail of destruction bears testament to the ferocity of the fightback mounted by Ukrainian soldiers to recapture the tiny hamlet a week ago.

Surveying the wreckage of a church at the village, Ukrainian army chaplain Nazarii Hahaliuk said it is inexplicable given that Ukraine and Russia both share the Orthodox Christian faith.

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He said he did "not believe as a person or a priest" in Russia's pledge to ease attacks on Kyiv.

"I feel pain, I feel tragedy, I feel spiritual decline like that of a person who has been killed," he said.

In the south, where tens of thousands of civilians were still trapped in heavily bombarded Mariupol with little food, water or medicine, Ukrainian authorities made a new try at rescue.

Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said 45 buses were heading to the port city in a new evacuation operation, as Russia said it would observe a ceasefire from 10:00 a.m. (07:00 GMT).

The international Red Cross said it was itself "ready to lead the safe passage operation" on Friday if the terms including the route and duration are agreed upon by all the parties.

Previous repeated attempts to agree a safety corridor to get them out have collapsed but the ICRC said it was "desperately important" to make the latest attempt work.

The ICRC's own aid warehouse near the city had been struck by Russian aircraft and artillery, Ukrainian ombudswoman Lyudmyla Denisova said.

Russia forces have encircled Mariupol, a strategic city for the Kremlin which needs to capture it to ensure an unbroken link between the breakaway regions in Donetsk and Lugansk which are under de facto Russian control.

'Don't believe anyone'

Authorities at the eastern city of Kharkiv, which has also suffered relentless shelling, on Thursday reported it was hammered by 47 artillery strikes and 380 rocket bombardments.

"We are working everyday to secure humanitarian corridors. For the moment, Russia is not offering this possibility," said Oleg Sinegubov, Kharkiv governor on Telegram, noting that one person was killed and three wounded by "massive" bombardments in the northern suburb of the city.

Zelensky had warned 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 video message late Wednesday. "There is an accumulation of Russian troops for new strikes in Donbas and we are preparing for it."

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

Zelenksy on Thursday further pushed Western allies to hit harder on the economic front, this time using an address to the Netherlands' parliament to urge the Dutch to boycott Russian energy exports.

The EU has joined the United States in imposing unprecedented sanctions against Russia but with some members mindful of ensuring their own power needs, the bloc has stopped short of enforcing a full-on energy embargo.

"Be willing to stop energy (exports) from Russia... so you don't contribute billions to the war," he said in a video address to Dutch lawmakers.

'Misled'

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."

A new round of video talks between Ukrainian and Russian officials is due to take place on Friday, after recent negotiations in Istanbul billed initially by both sides as having yielded some progress.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Thursday said a higher-level meeting "at

least at the level of foreign ministers" could happen in a week or two.

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.

"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."

But Russia's Defense Ministry on Thursday claimed that its "goals have been met."

"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."

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