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Moscow Says Western Aid Cannot Prevent Russian Victory in Ukraine

By Joshua Melvin for AFP and David Stout for AFP

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A view of the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works (back) damaged by shellfire in the city of Mariupol. **Peter Kovalev/TASS**

Russia on Thursday said Western aid to Kyiv had slowed its offensive in Ukraine but would not thwart its victory, as conflicting reports emerged about efforts to rescue civilians from a besieged steel plant in the devastated city of Mariupol.

Nearly 10 weeks into a war that has left thousands of people dead, flattened Ukrainian cities and uprooted more than 13 million people, the Kremlin conceded that Western countries had prevented a "quick" end to Russia's military campaign.

"The United States, Britain, NATO as a whole hand over intelligence... to Ukraine's armed forces on a permanent basis," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"Coupled with the flow of weapons that these countries are sending to Ukraine, these are all

actions that do not contribute to the quick completion of the operation," he told reporters.

The outside help, nevertheless, was "incapable of hindering the achievement" of the goals of Russia's military operation, he insisted.

Peskov was responding to a New York Times article on Wednesday that said intelligence provided by the United States has helped the Ukrainian military target "many" of the approximately dozen Russian generals who have been killed so far in the war.

Since failing to take Kyiv early on in its invasion, which Moscow launched on Feb. 24, Russia has focused its efforts on the east and south of Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has tirelessly campaigned for help from allies, on Thursday launched a global crowdfunding platform to help Kyiv win the war and rebuild the country's infrastructure.

'One click'

"In one click, you can donate funds to protect our defenders, to save our civilians and to rebuild Ukraine," Zelensky said in English in a video on his Twitter page, launching the United24 platform. "Every donation matters for victory."

Russian forces are on the verge of taking full control of the strategically important port of Mariupol, where Ukrainian troops holed up in the besieged Azovstal steelworks are making their land stand.

Hundreds of soldiers and civilians have been trapped in the factory's Soviet-era underground tunnels in what has become the last pocket of resistance in the area.

Russia was "trying to destroy" the remaining Ukrainian units at the sprawling complex, Kyiv's army said in a statement.

"With the support of aircraft, Russia resumed the offensive in order to take control of the plant," it said.

Russia's Defense Ministry on Wednesday announced a daytime ceasefire for three days at the steelworks to evacuate civilians from the plant, starting Thursday morning.

Peskov said on Thursday that humanitarian corridors to get civilians out of Azovstal "are functioning today."

But there was no confirmation of the evacuations by the Ukrainian side.

'Bloody battles'

Some 344 people were already evacuated in a second rescue operation at the plant earlier this week and taken to the Ukrainian-controlled Zaporizhzhia, Zelensky said on Wednesday.

Some 200 civilians are still believed to be stuck inside the huge plant, according to the mayor of Mariupol, Vadym Boichenko.

Zelensky on Wednesday said Ukraine was "ready" to support a ceasefire, and that women and children were among those awaiting rescue.

He also asked UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to help "save" wounded troops in Azovstal.

Capturing the southern port of Mariupol, battered by relentless Russian bombardment, would allow Russia to create a land bridge between separatist, pro-Russian regions in the east and Crimea, which Moscow annexed in 2014.

A commander of the Azov battalion, leading the defense of Mariupol, said late Wednesday that Russian soldiers had entered the Azovstal plant and there were "ongoing, bloody battles."

"The situation is extremely difficult but despite this we continue to execute the order to hold the defense," Azov commander Denys Prokopenko said in a video on Telegram.

Elsewhere, the governor of the Donbas region Pavlo Kyrylenko said at least 25 civilians were wounded in an overnight Russian strike on the city of Kramatorsk.

The Ukrainian army meanwhile said it had retaken control of "several settlements on the border of Mykolaiv and Kherson regions."

As well as sending money and weapons to Ukraine, Kyiv's Western allies have imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia to punish it for the invasion.

Oil embargo

The European Union on Wednesday proposed a gradual ban on Russian oil imports, in what would be the bloc's toughest move yet over Moscow's invasion of its neighbor.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said the EU would "phase out Russian supply of crude oil within six months and refined products by the end of the year," a move that would still not touch its huge gas exports.

Hungary — whose populist leader Viktor Orban is one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's few European partners — said it could not support the plan "in this form," as it would "completely destroy" the security of its energy supply.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said EU countries blocking an oil embargo would be "complicit" in Russia's crimes in Ukraine.

As May 9 approaches, the day when Russia marks the Soviet Union's victory over the Nazis in World War II, Ukraine suspects that Russia is planning to hold a military parade in Mariupol.

EU chief Charles Michel meanwhile told the Interfax-Ukraine news agency that the bloc should confiscate and sell Russian assets it has seized and use the proceeds to rebuild Ukraine.

He is the first high-ranking EU official to propose the confiscation of oligarchs' assets, his spokesman confirmed to AFP.

The suggestion echoes an idea already floated in the United States and comes as EU and U.S. task forces hunt down and grab yachts, mansions, bank accounts, helicopters and artworks owned by Russian oligarchs sanctioned by the West.

Ukraine's government in April estimated the cost of rebuilding after the war to be at least $600 billion (565 billion euros).

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