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Explosions Rock Kyiv as Battle for Severodonetsk Rages

By Blaise Gauquelin for AFP and Quentin Tyberghien for AFP

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Russia's army on Saturday claimed some Ukrainian military units were withdrawing from Severodonetsk but Mayor Oleksandr Striuk said Ukrainian forces were fighting to retake the city. **Russian Defense Ministry/TASS**

Explosions rocked the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on Sunday as a regional governor said Ukrainian forces were pushing back against Russian troops in the strategic eastern city of Severodonetsk.

The battle for Ukraine's eastern city of Severodonetsk was being waged street by street, President Volodymyr Zelensky said, while explosions rocked the capital early Sunday.

"Several explosions in Darnytsky and Dniprovsky districts of the city. Services are extinguishing," Mayor Vitali Klitschko said on Telegram shortly after air raid warnings sounded in Kyiv and several other cities.

"There are currently no dead from missile strikes on infrastructure. One wounded was hospitalized."

Ukrainian officials said railway infrastructure was targeted in the first strikes on Kyiv since April 28 when a Russian missile killed a producer for the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Separately, at least 11 civilians were reported killed in the Luhansk region where Severodonetsk is located, the nearby Donetsk region and in the southern city of Mykolaiv.

"The situation in Severodonetsk, where street fighting continues, remains extremely difficult," Zelensky said in his daily address Saturday evening.

Cities in the eastern Donbas area at the heart of the Russian offensive were under "constant air strikes, artillery and missile fire" but Ukrainian forces were holding their ground, he said.

Severodonetsk is the largest city still in Ukrainian hands in the Luhansk region of the Donbas, where Russian forces have been gradually advancing in recent weeks after retreating or being repelled from other areas, including around the capital Kyiv.

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> Smoke rises this morning over a Kyiv neighbourhood hit by a rocket strike overnight. Mayor Klitschko says no one killed, Russians likely targeting rail infrastructure. Video from UNIAN pic.twitter.com/Oo31jWHH07
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> — Matthew Luxmoore (@mjluxmoore) June 5, 2022

A city divided

Luhansk regional governor Sergiy Gaiday said Sunday that Russian forces had lost ground in the city.

"The Russians were in control of about 70% of the city, but have been forced back over the past two days," he said on Telegram.

"The city is divided in two. They are afraid to move freely around the city."

Russia's army on Saturday claimed some Ukrainian military units were withdrawing from Severodonetsk but Mayor Oleksandr Striuk said Ukrainian forces were fighting to retake the city.

"We are currently doing everything necessary to re-establish total control" of the city, he said in an interview broadcast on Telegram.

For its part, Moscow claims to have destroyed two Ukrainian command centers and six ammunition depots in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

"Ukrainian forces are successfully slowing down Russian operations to encircle Ukrainian positions in Luhansk [region] as well as Russian frontal assaults in Severodonetsk through prudent and effective local counterattacks in Severodonetsk", the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War said in an assessment late Saturday.

Related article: Russians Have Lost Ground in Severodonetsk: Regional Governor

'Put Russia in its place'

Tens of thousands of people have been killed, millions forced to flee and towns turned into rubble since Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an all-out assault on his pro-Western neighbor on Feb. 24.

Western powers have imposed increasingly stringent sanctions on Russia and supplied arms to Ukraine, but divisions have emerged on how to react.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Friday Putin had committed a "fundamental error" but that Russia should not be "humiliated" so that a diplomatic solution could be found.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba reacted Saturday by saying such calls "only humiliate France" and any country taking a similar position.

"It is Russia that humiliates itself. We all better focus on how to put Russia in its place," he said.

Despite diplomatic efforts, the conflict has raged in the south and east of the country.

Ukraine reported two victims from a Russian missile strike on Odessa in the southwest, without specifying if they were dead or wounded.

Russia's defense ministry said it had struck a "deployment point for foreign mercenaries" in the village of Dachne in the Odessa region.

It also claimed a missile strike in the northeastern Sumy region on an artillery training center with "foreign instructors."

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Fears over food

Apart from the human toll, the conflict has caused widespread damage to Ukraine's cultural heritage.

On Saturday, Ukrainian officials reported a large Orthodox wooden church, a popular pilgrim site, was on fire and blamed Russia.

Moscow continues to prove "its inability to be part of the civilized world," Culture Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko said in a statement.

Russia's defense ministry blamed "Ukrainian nationalists" for the blaze.

Russian troops now occupy a fifth of Ukraine's territory, according to Kyiv, and Moscow has imposed a blockade on its Black Sea ports, sparking fears of a global food crisis. Ukraine and Russia are among the top wheat exporters in the world.

The United Nations said it was leading intense negotiations with Russia to allow Ukraine's grain harvest to leave the country.

Putin said Friday there was "no problem" to export grain from Ukraine, via Kyiv- or Moscow-controlled ports or even through Central Europe.

The UN has warned that African countries, which normally import over half of their wheat consumption from Ukraine and Russia, face an "unprecedented" crisis.

Food prices in Africa have already exceeded those in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and the 2008 food riots.

The head of the African Union, Senegalese President Macky Sall, said Saturday he intended to visit Ukraine after meeting Putin the day before to discuss the wheat shortage.

Related article: AU Head Tells Putin Africans Are ‘Victims’ of Ukraine Conflict

'Game of survival'

Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov repeated the government's appeal for the swift delivery of heavy artillery Saturday.

If Kyiv receives requested equipment, he said, "I cannot forecast definitely what month we will kick them out, but I hope — and it's absolutely a realistic plan — to do it this year."

Away from the battlefield, Ukraine will be fighting for victory over Wales in Sunday's play-off final as they aim to reach their first football World Cup since 1958.

"We all understand that the game with Wales will no longer be about physical condition or tactics, it will be a game of survival," said Ukraine player Oleksandr Zinchenko.

"Everyone will fight to the end and give their all, because we will play for our country."

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