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# Large Russian Force Faces ‘Encirclement’ in Eastern Ukraine

By James Beardsworth

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Ukrainian servicemen in the Donetsk region of Ukraine. **Leo Correa / AP / TASS**

Russian forces were on the verge of a major military defeat Friday as Kyiv’s Armed Forces closed in on the occupied Ukrainian city of Lyman and appeared hours away from trapping thousands of Russian troops in an encirclement.

“Even if the city isn’t already enveloped, all the routes or roads out of the city are under Ukrainian artillery fire,” said military analyst Konrad Muzyka at Poland-based Rochan Consulting.

“Without Russian reinforcements, the city and the entire area is going to fall to Ukraine,” he told The Moscow Times.

A key supply hub for Russian forces, the stronghold of Lyman, which sits to the north of the Donets River in the north of Ukraine’s Donetsk region, has been the site of fierce fighting in

recent weeks as Ukraine seeks to press forward with a counteroffensive.

Following the recapture of Kharkiv region from Russia earlier this month, Ukrainian forces have been pressuring the city from the northwest via the small town of Drobysheve and from the southeast through the village of Dibrova.

Lyman was in a "half-encirclement," the Moscow-installed head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic Denis Pushilin admitted in a Telegram post Friday.

"Our guys are fighting, we're sending in reserves and we should be able to last it out, but the enemy has also committed significant forces. It's very unpleasant news."

Russian pro-war bloggers have expressed increasing alarm about the vulnerability of Russian forces in Lyman on messaging app Telegram since late Thursday.

"By midnight, the Ukrainian Armed Forces managed to actually complete the encirclement of Lyman," pro-Kremlin blogger Rybar posted early Friday morning. And pro-Kremlin journalist Semyon Pegov described the situation as "increasingly difficult" for Russian forces.

Ukraine has taken control of the Torskoye-Drobyshevo highway, Russia's last "supply and egress" route out of the city toward the largely Russian-occupied Luhansk region, U.S. think tank the Institute for the Study of War said in a report late Thursday.

It is unclear how many Russian troops could end up being trapped in and around Lyman, although some believe there could be thousands.

Russian units deployed to the area reportedly include Russia's 752nd Motorized Rifle Regiment, a mechanized infantry brigade from the 20th Guards Combined Arms Army as well as parts of Russia's BARS-13 detachment, a volunteer group.

"The situation is still extremely difficult. The enemy does not stop trying to repel us from Drobysheve. The enemy outnumbers us many times. Attacks are made by infantry with the support of artillery and aviation," the commander of the BARS-13 detachment, Sergei Fomchenkov, said Friday in an interview with the state-run RT network.

"Nevertheless, BARS-13 adamantly holds its positions."

Because the wetlands around Lyman do not lend themselves to effective tank warfare, much of the fighting is likely being carried out by infantry and artillery, said Muzyka.

Lyman, which sits on a key rail crossroads, is one of Russia's last lines of defense before the Donetsk region's eastern border with Luhansk. Together, Donetsk and Luhansk regions — known as the Donbas — are a key war aim for the Kremlin.

Despite the looming threat of encirclement, Russian forces have refused to pull troops out of Lyman in what Muzyka said is likely a tactic to buy time.

Observers believe that Moscow will attempt to use the additional manpower raised as a result of President Vladimir Putin's "partial" mobilization announced last week to shore up its defenses in occupied Ukraine.

Some of these newly mobilized men have already been deployed to the battlefield, including to positions around Lyman, according to Ukraine's Armed Forces.

"The enemy continues to send newly mobilized, low-skilled personnel to the areas of combat operations," Ukraine's General Staff said Thursday in a statement.

By continuing to fight in Lyman, according to Muzyka, Russia can tie down Ukrainian forces while it trains and deploys new recruits to defensive lines ahead of an expected battle for Sievierodonetsk, a major city east of Lyman that fell to Russian forces in June.

But at the same time, the encirclement of a large Russian force — especially following Putin's declaration Friday that Russia was annexing Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions — would be a symbolic and military blow.

The long-term significance of the loss of Lyman will depend on how successfully Moscow can withstand the next wave of attacks by Ukrainian forces, which are seeking to advance further into the Donbas.

"This will definitely be a tactical setback," Muzyka said.

"But whether we're looking at a strategic failure will depend on if there is a massive collapse of Russian lines in Luhansk in the next couple of weeks."

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