

Ukraine Says Dozens of Villages Recaptured Amid Russian Retreat

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Kyiv forces have recaptured over 40 towns and villages in southern Ukraine, President Zelensky said Thursday, as Moscow signaled its army had begun retreating from the strategic city of Kherson.

The United States meanwhile announced a new \$400 million security assistance package for Kyiv, which will include defense systems and surface-to-air missiles as Ukraine is reeling from massive recent Russian airstrikes targeting key infrastructure.

"Today we have good news from the south," Zelensky said in his daily address to the nation. "The number of Ukrainian flags returning to their rightful place as part of the ongoing defense operation is already dozens."

Zelensky said 41 settlements have been "liberated" from Russian occupation.

Moscow said it had made the "difficult decision" to pull forces from Kherson, and Russia's Defense Ministry on Thursday said its units were maneuvering in the area.

Ukrainian troops have for weeks been capturing villages en route to Kherson city in the eponymous region, where Kremlin-installed leaders have been pulling out civilians in what Kyiv has called illegal deportations.

The retreat would be a major Russian setback in a region Vladimir Putin claimed to have annexed, but officials in Kyiv have remained wary, saying Russia was unlikely to leave Kherson without a fight.

Battlefield... and diplomacy?

In his speech, Zelensky, who has been facing pressure from Western capitals to resume peace talks with Russia, hinted that negotiations were not ruled out if Ukraine regains all its territory.

"We have to go all the way on the battlefield and through diplomacy so that all over our land, along our entire internationally recognized border, our flags — Ukrainian flags — are installed," Zelensky said.

He also thanked U.S. President Joe Biden and the American people for the air defense systems.

"Together we're building an air shield to protect civilians," Zelensky said on Twitter. "We're bringing victory over the aggressor closer!"

U.S. media have reported in recent days that the Biden administration has been urging Zelensky to publicly declare a willingness to talk to Russia.

And on Wednesday top U.S. general Mark Milley said that military victory may not be possible in the war.

"There's... an opportunity here, a window of opportunity for negotiation," he said.

'Can you trust a thing they say?'

On the battlefield, in the southern city of Mykolaiv, which Russian forces have pounded with artillery and missiles for months, there was little belief the Russians would retreat.

"How can you trust a thing they say?" asked Volodymyr Vypritskiy, a 55-year-old driver. "How can you trust people that always told us they were our brothers? People who start killing their brothers — can you really believe them?"

Zelensky has suggested Russia could be strategically feigning rather than experiencing a major setback.

Military officials in Kyiv reiterated that caution on Thursday.

"At this point, we can't confirm or deny information about the retreat of Russian troops from Kherson," said Oleksiy Gromov, from the Ukrainian armed forces' general staff.

Russia losing the Kherson region would return to Ukraine important access to the Sea of Azov and leave Putin with little to show from a campaign that has turned him into a pariah in Western eyes.

The retreat will put pressure on Russian control of the rest of the Kherson region, which forms a land bridge from Russia to Crimea, the peninsula that Moscow annexed in 2014.

Massive casualties

Kherson was one of four Ukrainian regions that Russia declared it had annexed in September, shortly after being forced to withdraw from swathes of territory in the northeastern Kharkiv region.

The United States this week estimated more than 100,000 Russian military personnel have been killed or wounded in Ukraine.

Kyiv's forces have likely suffered similar casualties, according to General Milley.

Russia has been pushing to capture the eastern Donbas city of Bakhmut, with the battered town famous for wine and salt mines coming under intensive fire for weeks.

"It has become harder these past three days. The Russians are pushing more and more. But our boys are holding their positions," 26-year-old soldier Vitaliy told AFP in Bakhmut.

Around half of the 70,000 people living in the city have stayed despite the fighting, mostly in the east of the city, for the past four months.

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