

Strikes in East Ukraine Despite Putin's Ceasefire Order

By [AFP](#)

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Artillery exchanges pounded war-scarred cities in eastern Ukraine on Friday despite Russian leader Vladimir Putin unilaterally ordering his forces to pause attacks for 36 hours for the Orthodox Christmas.

The brief ceasefire declared by Putin earlier this week was supposed to begin at 09:00 GMT Friday and would have been the first full pause since Moscow's invasion in February 2022.

But AFP journalists heard both outgoing and incoming shelling in the frontline city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine after the time when the Russian ceasefire was supposed to have begun.

Moscow's forces also struck Kramatorsk in the east, the Ukrainian presidential administration said, as well as the frontline town of Kurakhove where residential buildings

and a medical facility were damaged.

Putin's order to stop fighting during the Orthodox Christmas came after Moscow suffered its worst reported loss of life in the war and as Ukraine's allies pledged to send armored vehicles and a second Patriot air defense battery to aid Kyiv.

Ceasefire 'not serious'

Kyrylo Tymoshenko from the Ukraine president's office earlier said that Moscow's forces had struck a fire station in the southern city of Kherson in an attack that left several people dead or wounded.

"They talk about a ceasefire. This is who we are at war with," he said.

The head of Ukraine's Lugansk region meanwhile added that Russian forces had fired 14 times on Kyiv's position in the regions and attempted to storm a settlement held by Ukrainian forces.

Russia's Defense Ministry said however it was respecting its unilateral ceasefire and accused Ukraine's forces of continued shelling.

Both countries celebrate Orthodox Christmas and the Russian leader's order came following ceasefire calls from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russia's spiritual leader Patriarch Kirill, a staunch Putin supporter.

Ukraine had already dismissed the halt — due to last until the end of Saturday (21:00 GMT) — as a strategy by Russia to gain time to regroup its forces and bolster its defenses following a series of battlefield reversals.

The French foreign ministry described the so-called ceasefire as a "crude" attempt by Russia to divert attention from its culpability for the war.

While the EU's most senior diplomat said Friday the ceasefire was "not credible."

"The Kremlin totally lacks credibility and this declaration of a unilateral ceasefire is not credible," European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said during a visit to Morocco.

Since the invasion began on Feb. 24 last year, Russia has occupied parts of eastern and southern Ukraine, but Kyiv has reclaimed swathes of its territory and this week claimed a New Year's strike that killed scores of Moscow's troops.

The Kremlin said Thursday that during a telephone conversation with Erdogan, Putin had told the Turkish leader Moscow was ready for dialogue if Kyiv recognizes "new territorial realities."

He was referring to Russia's claim to have annexed four regions of Ukraine, including Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions — despite not fully controlling them.

In Bakhmut, located in the Donetsk region, dozens of civilians gathered at a building used as a base for disbursing humanitarian aid, where volunteers organized a Christmas Eve

celebration less than an hour after the ceasefire was to go into effect, handing out mandarins, apples and cookies.

The streets of the largely bombed-out city were mostly empty save for military vehicles. Shelling was lighter on Friday than it had been in recent days.

Pavlo Diachenko, a police officer in Bakhmut, said he doubted the ceasefire would mean much to the city's civilians even if it had been respected.

"What can a church holiday mean for them? They are shelling every day and night and almost every day there are people killed," he said.

Kirill, 76, made his ceasefire appeal "so that Orthodox people can attend services on Christmas Eve and on the day of the Nativity of Christ," he said on the church's official website Thursday.

But there was widespread skepticism in the streets of Kyiv to the gesture.

"You can never trust them, never... Whatever they promise, they don't deliver," said Olena Fedorenko, a 46-year-old from the war-torn city of Mykolaiv in southern Ukraine.

More arms for Ukraine

Far from the frontline, Moscow resident Tatyana Zakharova said she was not in a festive mood on the eve of Orthodox Christmas because her brother was fighting in Ukraine.

"Of course, we will go to church... we will pray first of all for my brother, our boys," the 35-year-old told AFP.

News of Putin's ceasefire order came as Germany and the United States pledged to provide additional military aid for Kyiv, with U.S. President Joe Biden saying the promised equipment comes at a "critical point" in the war.

Washington and Berlin said in a joint statement that they will respectively provide Kyiv with Bradley and Marder infantry fighting vehicles.

Putin's ceasefire order came a day after Moscow lifted its reported toll in its worst single reported loss from a Ukrainian strike to 89 dead.

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