

Ukraine to Replace Defense Minister After Corruption Scandals

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Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov speaks during a press conference in Kyiv, Ukraine, Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023. **AP Photo / Daniel Cole / TASS**

Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov will be replaced by the chief of the military intelligence ahead of an expected Russian offensive and following corruption scandals, a senior lawmaker said Sunday.

"We are preparing decisions and negotiations that should strengthen our soldiers, give Ukraine more international support and more weapons," President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his evening address without elaborating.

Zelensky said this week he wanted talks on Ukraine's membership in the EU to begin this year, stepping up the fight against corruption.

A senior lawmaker close to Zelensky said later Sunday that 56-year-old Reznikov, one of the

best-known faces of the country's war effort, would be replaced.

"Kyrylo Budanov will head the defense ministry, which is absolutely logical in wartime," said lawmaker David Arakhamia, referring to the 37-year-old chief of military intelligence.

Holding the rank of major general, Budanov has headed the military intelligence since August 2020.

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'War dictates policies'

Reznikov will be appointed minister for strategic industries, said Arakhamia.

"War dictates personnel policies. Time and circumstances require reinforcement and regrouping," he added.

"The enemy is preparing to advance. We are preparing to defend ourselves."

Reznikov was appointed defense minister in November 2021 and has helped secure Western weapons to buttress Ukrainian forces. But his ministry has been beset by corruption scandals.

Reznikov's deputy was forced to resign in late January after the ministry was accused of signing food contracts at prices two to three times higher than current rates for basic foodstuffs.

Speaking to reporters earlier Sunday, Reznikov did not say if he planned to stay on at the ministry, but that only President Zelensky could decide his fate.

"The stress that I have endured this year is hard to measure precisely. I am not ashamed of anything," Reznikov said. "My conscience is absolutely clear."

An internal audit of procurement procedures was underway at the defense ministry, he said.

He added that the ministry's own anti-corruption department had "failed" to do its job and needed to be "completely rebooted."

With graft a key European concern, Ukraine's government has stepped up work to clean up its act, launching high-profile raids this week targeting an oligarch with political connections, and a former interior minister.

Speaking to reporters, Reznikov also urged the West to send warplanes, after Germany and the United States finally agreed to supply heavy tanks following weeks of deliberations.

"I am sure that we will win this war," Reznikov said, but without Western jets, "it will cost us more lives."

In eastern Ukraine, heavy fighting was underway in the northern parts of the frontline hotspot Bakhmut. Russia has claimed gains in recent days around the war-ravaged city in the region of Donetsk.

"In the northern quarters of Artemovsk, fierce battles are going on for every street, every house, every stairwell," the head of Russian mercenary group Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, said in a statement, referring to Bakhmut by its previous name.

"The Ukrainian armed forces are fighting to the last," he said.

Russian forces have been trying to capture Bakhmut in the eastern region of Donetsk for months, in what has become the longest and bloodiest battle since Russia invaded Ukraine last February.

In Bakhmut Sunday, about 20 people, including two soldiers, attended a mass in the basement of the golden-domed All Saints' church.

Three women sang hymns, punctuated by sounds of mortar shells in the background. The room was lit by two dozen candles and a portable light used by the two priests to read from the bible.

"Today I prayed that everything will be better for me after I die," said 20-year-old Serafim Chernyshov, standing outside the church.

"I came to pray for peace," added Lyubov Avramenko, 84.

Zelensky said on Friday that Kyiv's troops would fight for Bakhmut "as long as we can."

The British defense ministry said Sunday that over the past week, Russia had made "small advances" in its attempt to encircle Bakhmut.

Related article: [Ukraine Says Latest Russian Assault on Bakhmut Beaten Back](#)

Missile strikes in Kharkiv

For months Moscow has targeted Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, including the energy grid, leaving millions in the dark and cold in the middle of winter.

In Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, a missile strike on a residential building Sunday wounded four people, a local official said. Another strike that hit a university wounded a security guard.

Around 280,000 households in the southern city of Odesa were still without power following Saturday's accident at an electrical substation, already damaged by Russian strikes, said Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal.

As a result, schools will be closed in the city on Monday and Tuesday, officials said.

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