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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Wagner Chief Says Russia's 'Monstrous Bureacracy' Impeding Ukraine Fight

By AFP

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A Ukrainian serviceman stands near a pile of empty mortar shell containers in Bakhmut. **Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP**

The head of Russia's mercenary outfit Wagner said on Thursday it could take months to capture the embattled Ukraine city of Bakhmut and slammed Moscow's "monstrous bureaucracy" for slowing military gains.

Russia has been trying to encircle and capture the battered industrial city ahead of Feb. 24, the first anniversary of what it terms its "special military operation" in Ukraine.

"I think it's (going to be in) March or in April," Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin said in one of several messages posted online.

"To take Bakhmut you have to cut all supply routes. It's a significant task," he said, adding: "Progress is not going as fast as we would like.

"Bakhmut would have been taken before the New Year, if not for our monstrous military bureaucracy."

Prigozhin has previously accused the Russian military of attempting to "steal" victories from Wagner, a sign of his rising clout and the potential for dangerous rifts in Moscow.

Wagner's claims to have captured ground without help from the regular army have also spurred friction with senior military leadership.

In Bakhmut, Artem, a deputy commander with a Ukrainian mortar unit, said fighting remained intense.

"There's a regular Russian army here and they also have regular artillery groups and they shoot accurately as well," he said.

'Most important' weapons

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed to have annexed the Donetsk region that surrounds Bakhmut last year.

But the fierce fighting for the city is now the longest-running battle of Russia's campaign and Moscow's key military objective.

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Taking Bakhmut would be a major win for Moscow, though analysts say its capture would be mainly symbolic as the salt-mining town holds little strategic value.

As the conflict's one-year anniversary approaches next week, the United States and its allies plan to mark the grim milestone with major new sanctions against Russia, Victoria Nuland, undersecretary of state for political affairs, said Thursday.

"These sanctions will deepen and broaden in certain categories where we have been active before, particularly in limiting the flow of technology to the Russian defense industry," she told reporters.

The package would also target individuals, expand banking restrictions and crack down on evasion of existing sanctions, Nuland said.

President Joe Biden has led international sanction efforts, notably by curbing the flow of and payments for Russian oil and gas, but Moscow has adapted by expanding trade with China and India.

Also on Thursday, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen visited Kyiv and Bucha in the first visit by an Israeli minister since the offensive started.

"Israel stands firmly in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and remains committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Cohen said during a press conference in Kyiv

with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba.

But Cohen, who is due to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, did not announce any pledges of weapons that Ukraine has been requesting for months.

Israel has adopted a cautious approach since Russia's Ukraine campaign began last February, seeking to maintain neutrality between the two sides.

Cohen's Ukrainian counterpart said he was "grateful" for humanitarian initiatives but emphasized it was "most important" that Ukraine be able to win on the battlefield.

"Israel is aware of our list of military needs, and we will wait for the relevant decisions to be made, primarily regarding the protection of Ukrainian sky," Kuleba said.

'Only' if attacked

Ukraine especially hopes to learn from Israel's extensive air defense experience, as Moscow has been unleashing regular waves of aerial attacks on the country's infrastructure.

The strikes have left millions in the cold and dark in the middle of winter.

In the latest wave overnight, Kyiv said it had shot down 16 of the two dozen missiles launched from planes and ships in the Black Sea.

The missiles, which hit the north and west of Ukraine, killed a 79-year-old in the central Dnipropetrovsk region.

With Russia still battering the energy grid — despite what analysts say is a dwindling stockpile of long-range projectiles — fears have steadily mounted of a potential new Russian attack from the north.

Russia had launched the nearly year-old offensive from its soil and Belarus, ruled by Kremlin-ally Alexander Lukashenko.

During a rare interview with international media including AFP, on Thursday, Lukashenko said his country would only join Russia's offensive in Ukraine if Belarus is attacked first by Kyiv.

"I'm ready to fight together with the Russians from the territory of Belarus in one case only: if so much as one soldier from (Ukraine) comes to our territory with a gun to kill my people," he said.

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