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'Russia Does Not Count People,' Zelensky Says of Brutal Bakhmut Fight

By Emmanuel Peuchot for AFP and Elizabeth Striy for AFP

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Smoke rises after shelling in Bakhmut. **Dimitar Dilkoff / AFP**

Pressure is mounting on Ukrainian forces as fighting for the eastern frontline city of Bakhmut is getting ever more brutal with Russia losing hundreds of troops a day, President Volodymyr Zelensky said Tuesday.

As the battle raged, Moscow said it shot down Ukrainian drones targeting civilian sites in Russian territory while another one crashed near the capital.

AFP aerial footage released Tuesday showed almost all buildings in Bakhmut in ruins and smoke rising over the city once known for its sparkling wine production and salt mines.

"The most difficult, as before, is Bakhmut... Russia does not count people at all, sending them to constantly assault our positions," Zelensky said, adding that Russia has lost some 800 soldiers since Thursday in one direction alone. "The intensity of the fighting is only

increasing."

Bakhmut may hold more political importance than military value, with Moscow eager for any victory after months of slow gains in the east and setbacks elsewhere, but Zelensky has vowed to defend it as long as possible.

"The situation around Bakhmut is extremely tense," the commander of Ukraine's ground forces Oleksandr Syrskyi said earlier Tuesday.

"Despite taking significant losses, the enemy has dispatched its best-trained Wagner assault units to try to break through the defenses of our troops and surround the city," Syrskyi added, referring to the Russian mercenary group.

Bakhmut 'will fall'

Bakhmut, which once had a population of around 70,000 people, has seen a gradual exodus and now only 5,000 civilians remain including some 140 children, according to officials.

"I think Bakhmut will most likely fall," a Ukrainian soldier with the call sign "Fox" told AFP journalists there this week, conceding that Russian forces were making gains around the city.

"They say (Russians soldiers) are idiots, alcoholics and drug addicts," the 40-year-old said.

"But they have smart people there, people who know how to fight... They think, they learn, the same way we do."

Valerii, a Bakhmut resident, told AFP that he had no intention of leaving the town, regardless of how fierce the fighting becomes.

"My apartment is right over there. And honestly I will die in my apartment, or near my building. Where would we go? Who needs us?" he said.

Russia's Wagner group, a once-shadowy force founded by Kremlin-linked businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, has taken center stage in the fight for Bakhmut.

The U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW) said Tuesday that regular Russian troops may be now "attempting to institutionalize tactics used to marginal tactical effect by the Wagner Group."

Drones downed over Russia

The assessment of fighting in the east came as Russia said it had downed drones that were closing in on civilian targets.

The incidents are the latest in a series of suspected attacks in recent months inside Russia that Moscow has blamed on Kyiv.

Officials said they downed drones over the southern Krasnodar region, the Adygea Republic and over the border region of Bryansk.

The governor of the Moscow region Andrei Vorobyov meanwhile said a drone that was likely targeting civilian infrastructure also crashed near the capital. There were no casualties or damage on the ground, he said.

Meeting with the Federal Security Service on Tuesday, President Vladimir Putin said more work was needed to secure Russia's borders.

Putin's close ally and Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko arrived in Beijing for a three-day trip that will include talks with China's leader Xi Jinping.

Lukashenko's visit comes shortly after Beijing released a position paper on Russia's war in Ukraine insisting it is a neutral party and calling for dialogue between the two sides.

It also follows allegations by the United States and NATO that Beijing could be mulling sending arms to Russia as the conflict enters its second year. China has strenuously denied the claims.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said the priority for Ukraine was to fight off Russia's invasion with allies' backing and that in the ''long-term'' the nation would join the alliance.

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