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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Strikes Kill 26 Including 5 Children

By Sergey Volskiy for AFP

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A woman walks past damaged residential buildings as she carries a child in Uman, around 215km southern Kyiv. **Sergei Supinsky / AFP**

Russian strikes battered cities across Ukraine on Friday, killing 26 people including five children, as Kyiv said preparations for a counteroffensive against Moscow's forces were nearly complete.

The deadly new attacks included a strike on a residential block in the historic city of Uman in central Ukraine, where AFP journalists saw rescue workers extracting victims' remains from a destroyed residential building.

The barrage of almost two dozen missiles ended a weeks-long pause following the repeated Russian strikes that had aimed to paralyze Ukraine's energy grid during the winter months.

On Friday evening, workers in Uman, the site of an annual Hasidic pilgrimage, pulled the body

of another child from under the rubble. Authorities said Russian cruise missiles killed 23 people — including four children — in Uman.

Earlier in the day, Dmitry, a 33-year-old resident from Luhansk, an eastern city under Russian control, was looking for his children.

"I want to see my children, they are under the rubble," he said.

Rescuers were using cranes to search for survivors among the remains of the multi-story housing block in the city of 80,000 inhabitants.

"I've seen a lot, but I haven't lost my children before. Now I want to see my children, alive or dead," Dmitry said.

Russian missiles also hit the central city of Dnipro, already grief-stricken after a January strike on a tower block that killed more than 40 people.

Authorities said the strikes in Dnipro killed a 31-year-old woman and her two-year-old daughter while they slept.

The young woman's parents were hospitalized.

"Neighbours say that it was a quiet and kind family," regional authorities said.

Separately, authorities in the southern region of Kherson said on Friday evening that Russian forces shelled the village of Bilozerka, killing a 57-year-old woman and wounding another three people.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned the latest barrage and vowed a response.

"Only absolute evil can unleash such terror against Ukraine," he said in his evening address.

His adviser Mykhaylo Podolyak tweeted: "If you don't want THIS spread around the world, then give us weapons. Lots of weapons. And add sanctions."

Moscow said it had targeted reserve units of the Ukrainian military and that "all assigned objects were hit."

Moscow-installed officials in eastern Ukraine said Ukrainian shelling had killed nine people, including an eight-year-old girl in the city of Donetsk.

'We are ready'

There were no reported casualties in Kyiv, which was among the cities targeted Friday.

The capital had not been hit by missiles in more than 50 days, although last week it was attacked by 12 Iranian-made drones, eight of which were shot down without causing any casualties.

Ukraine said overall it had downed 21 of 23 Russian missiles and two attack drones.

The country's air defense system has been bolstered in recent months by the delivery of Western equipment crucial to the country's war effort.

The new strikes came as Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said his country's preparations to push back against entrenched Russian positions were almost complete.

NATO allies and partners have provided Ukraine with 1,550 armored vehicles and 230 tanks to form units and help it retake territory from Russian forces, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday.

"Equipment has been promised, prepared and partially delivered. In a global sense, we're ready," Reznikov said.

Kyiv has said throughout the war launched by Russia in February 2022 that it is intent on repelling Moscow's forces from territory they control in eastern and southern Ukraine.

"Preparations are coming to an end," Reznikov added of the planned offensive.

'Only way to survive'

"As soon as there is God's will, the weather and the decision of the commanders -- we will do it."

But he added that Washington's promised Abrams tanks "will not have time to take part in this counteroffensive".

Last month the Pentagon said the Abrams vehicles — one of the most powerful and sophisticated weapons in the US army — would arrive in Ukraine in late 2023.

Most of the fighting has been focused on the eastern Donbas region, particularly the city of Bakhmut, which has been almost completely destroyed.

Several Ukrainian soldiers told AFP that tough clashes in Bakhmut involved not only members of mercenary group Wagner but also Russian special forces.

Not far from Bakhmut, Alex, 34, said the situation was difficult.

"We lack soldiers, we have many wounded, and also dead," he said.

"Sometimes in the trenches, you have to hide behind a corpse. It's the only way to survive."

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin said on Friday he had paid a rare visit to the embattled city and vowed Moscow would rebuild it.

In need of allies to support its drawn-out war effort, Moscow has cultivated its relationship with China.

The leaders of Ukraine and China spoke by telephone this week, with Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly advocating peace talks.

Xi and Zelensky's discussion on Wednesday was met by Russian accusations that Ukraine was

undermining efforts to end the fighting.

Zelensky said Friday he had asked Xi to help bring back Ukrainian children deported by Russia.

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