

Ukraine Leader Targets 'Jets Coalition' on U.K. Visit

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British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. **Simon Dawson / No 10 Downing Street / flickr**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on a visit to Britain Monday won the promise of "hundreds" more missiles and drones — and said his coveted goal of enlisting Western fighter jets was drawing nearer.

The visit came as a Russian missile strike killed four people and hit a hospital in eastern Ukraine, but also as Zelensky's army readies a long-awaited counteroffensive against the Russian invaders with claimed gains around the flashpoint town of Bakhmut.

After meeting UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Zelensky said he was "very positive" about creating a "jets coalition" in the war against Russia, with a decision expected "in the closest time."

Western nations have balked so far at providing advanced jets to help Ukraine take command of the skies against Russia, although Sunak said the U.K. was readying to open a flight school to train its pilots.

And while Russia's ally China vies to act as peace broker, sending an envoy to Kyiv this week, Zelensky drummed up hefty new packages of military aid on weekend visits to France and Germany.

He proceeded Monday to the U.K. prime minister's country estate of Chequers outside London. Sunak pledged air-defense missiles and long-range attack drones for Ukraine, both numbering in the hundreds.

Russia said the new U.K. weapons would only cause "further destruction", and claimed to have downed a Storm Shadow cruise missile that Britain said last week it was providing, in the West's first deployment of long-range rocketry for Ukraine.

Spirit of Churchill

Sunak noted that the Chequers meeting was taking place in the buildup to a Council of Europe leaders' meeting in Iceland and a G7 summit in Japan, as he hit out at Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"The front lines of Putin's war of aggression may be in Ukraine but the fault lines stretch all over the world," Sunak said, vowing: "We must not let them down."

Sunak hosted Zelensky in the same Chequers room used by Britain's World War II leader Winston Churchill to broadcast defiant speeches vowing victory over the Nazis.

"And the same way today, your leadership, your country's bravery and fortitude are an inspiration to us all," he told Zelensky.

Dressed in his trademark fatigues, Zelensky gave a bear hug to Sunak after disembarking from a Royal Air Force Chinook helicopter, and thanked him for the latest UK aid.

He said the crisis was a matter of "security not only for Ukraine, it is important for all of Europe."

The timing and focus of Ukraine's high-stakes counteroffensive remain unclear, but Zelensky's tour of European capitals underscored the importance of securing Western heavy weapons and ammunition to press the fight.

France offered dozens more light tanks and armored vehicles, while Germany said it was preparing a new military package worth 2.7 billion euros (\$3 billion) — its biggest yet for Ukraine.

The British attack drones have a reach of more than 200 kilometers (125 miles), according to the U.K. government, complementing the long-range Storm Shadow missiles.

Chinese mediation

As the fighting appears poised to increase after months of stalemate, high-ranking Chinese diplomat Li Hui will start a two-day visit to Kyiv on Tuesday, a Ukrainian government official told AFP.

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Moscow in March and has been criticized for refusing to condemn Putin's war.

But Moscow hit back at comments made by French President Emmanuel Macron, who had said Russia was becoming a vassal to China.

"We categorically disagree with this. Our relations with China have the character of a special, strategic partnership," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

On the front line, Kyiv said Ukrainian forces had captured more than 10 Russian positions on the outskirts of Bakhmut, where a fierce battle for control began nearly a year ago.

Russia said two of its military commanders had been killed in combat near the town, where fighting has been raging for days.

The head of Russia's private Wagner mercenary group Yevgeny Prigozhin again accused the Russian army of inaction around Bakhmut.

But Prigozhin dismissed as "laughable" a Washington Post report that he had offered information on Russian troop positions to Ukraine in January, in return for respite for Wagner forces near Bakhmut.

Meanwhile, seven people, including a Russian-installed senior official and a teenager, were injured in a blast in the center of Russian-controlled Luhansk, local officials said.

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