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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kyiv Claims Gains in Donbas, Moscow Says Killed Ukraine Generals

By AFP

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A Ukrainian soldier of the 28th Separate Mechanized Brigade sits inside a vehicle at the front line near the town of Bakhmut, Donetsk region. **Anatolii Stepanov / AFP**

Kyiv said Thursday its forces were gaining ground in Donbas, as Moscow claimed it had killed two generals in a missile strike earlier this week — the same day strikes on a restaurant in east Ukraine killed at least 12 people.

Sixteen months into Russia's invasion, Kyiv said it was advancing around Bakhmut and fighting "fierce" battles as part of its counteroffensive launched after weeks of anticipation earlier this month.

Moscow meanwhile insisted that an armed rebellion that shook President Vladimir Putin's rule last weekend would not affect Russia's operations in Ukraine.

On Tuesday night, a Russian strike destroyed the Ria Pizza restaurant in Kramatorsk, popular

with soldiers, journalists and aid workers.

Ukraine said Thursday that the death toll of the strike had risen to 12, including three children, and that 65 people had been wounded.

Kyiv says the eatery was packed with civilians and busy when the strike hit.

Russia claimed it had "eliminated two generals and up to 50 officers" in a missile strike Tuesday in Kramatorsk — the largest east Ukrainian city under Kyiv's control.

Further east, the Ukrainian army said it had made advances near Bakhmut.

"We are moving," the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Oleksandr Syrskyi, said in a post on social media.

Time for NATO 'clarity'

Russian forces announced their capture of Bakhmut in mid-May after months of grueling warfare and Ukraine has since been posting painstaking gains around the flanks of the city.

Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar said Kyiv was "gnawing away at every meter of the enemy's land in this fierce battle."

But Ukraine also showed frustration towards its Western allies Thursday, demanding clarity from NATO on its stance on Kyiv's membership ahead of a key alliance summit next month in Vilnius.

"The time for clarity on Ukraine's membership in the Alliance has come," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Twitter.

The latest Ukrainian call to join NATO came after Putin's more than two-decade rule was rattled by an armed mutiny over the weekend.

Russia has insisted that the mutiny, staged by the Wagner mercenary group, would not affect its Ukraine campaign and that Putin had not been weakened.

The Kremlin said that footage, which could not be verified, apparently showing Putin greeting adoring supporters proved that he had "astounding" support.

Wagner mercenaries advanced hundreds of kilometers — approaching Moscow — and captured military facilities in southern Russia, and were welcomed by at least some local people.

Putin is rarely seen meeting ordinary Russians, especially since the Covid pandemic, which saw him observe strict isolation rules. Some of those restrictions are still in place.

'Support and happiness'

Moscow late on Wednesday released footage of Putin walking up to a cheering group of mostly women in Derbent, an ancient city in the Dagestan region of southern Russia.

"In Derbent, there was an astounding demonstration of support and happiness of the local population," said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Surrounded by men in suits and a cameraman, the 70-year-old leader reached out over a barrier to shake people's hands.

Then, with his jacket off, he waved goodbye and blew a kiss to the crowd, before getting in a car.

The Kremlin, which has not mentioned Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin by name since his mutiny, has insisted that Putin has not been weakened by the rebellion.

Vatican envoy in Moscow

As fighting raged in eastern Ukraine, the Vatican's peace envoy was in Moscow, three weeks after talks with President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv.

Cardinal Matteo Zuppi met Moscow's ombudswoman for children's rights Maria Lvova-Belova, who is wanted by the International Court of Human Rights for the illegal transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia.

"I am sure that Christian love and mercy will help in dialogue and mutual understanding," Lvova-Belova said, after the meeting.

Kyiv has said that Zuppi could help by arranging for the release of Ukrainian prisoners of war and the return of thousands of Ukrainian children from Russia.

Kyiv says more than 16,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia since the beginning of the Kremlin's large-scale military campaign in Ukraine and that many were placed in institutions and foster homes.

Zuppi is due to meet Russia's Patriarch Kirill — a staunch ally of Putin and supporter of the invasion — later Thursday, the Vatican's envoy in Moscow said.

The Vatican said the purpose of Zuppi's visit was to "encourage gestures of humanity, which can help promote a solution to the current tragic situation and find ways to achieve a just peace."

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