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Zelensky Hails 'Historic' Decision to Hand F-16 Fighter Jets to Ukraine

By AFP

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Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed Sunday a "historic" decision by the Netherlands and Denmark to provide American F-16 fighter jets, the latest move by Western allies to bolster his country's efforts to fend off Russia's invasion.

Zelensky had sought the advanced jets for months to strengthen Ukraine's Soviet-era air force as it pursues a grinding counteroffensive against Russian forces in the east.

Washington announced its approval of the F-16 transfers on Friday, with training of Ukraine pilots set to begin this month, which may allow Ukraine to begin deploying the jets in early 2024.

The decision is "absolutely historic, powerful and inspiring for us," Zelensky said alongside Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte during a visit to the Eindhoven air force base in the

Netherlands.

Rutte said the number of F-16s provided to Kyiv had not been determined, but Zelensky said in a later statement that "Our warriors will receive 42 great combat aircraft."

Zelensky then traveled to Denmark's Skrydstrup air force base and was greeted by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who said "We also know that you need more, and that is why today we announced that we will donate 19 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine."

Six of the jets will be delivered by the end of this year, eight next year and five in 2025, she said.

"This is a very powerful support for us — training missions are already starting," Zelensky said.

"We are doing our best to get even more results for Ukraine," he added. "In particular, today we discussed the expansion of training missions."

In a separate statement, Zelensky thanked the US, which has strict rules on the sale or transfer of American military equipment by its allies.

"I also thank President Joseph Biden, both parties in the US Congress, and the entire American people for their unwavering support and continuously positive steps for the aviation coalition and for the benefit of our common freedom," he said.

Drones downed in Russia

The long-sought approval to supply the jets drew a warning from Russia.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Moscow would consider the F-16s a "nuclear" threat because of their capacity to carry atomic weapons.

Russia also announced that it prevented Ukrainian drone attacks on Moscow and its region on Sunday, the second such incident in two days.

Both sides have reported regular drone incursions during the conflict, with strikes on Russian territory becoming increasingly regular.

"At around 4:00 a.m. (01:00 GMT), an attempt by the Kyiv regime to carry out a terrorist attack by drone on infrastructure in Moscow and the Moscow region was thwarted," the Russian Defense Ministry said.

The Moscow-bound drone was destroyed by "electronic warfare" and crashed into an uninhabited area after losing control, the ministry said, reporting no victims or damage.

But a Ukrainian drone raid hit a railway station in the western Russian city of Kursk, injuring five people, the regional governor said early Sunday.

In the southern region of Rostov that borders Ukraine, Russian air defense intercepted two Ukrainian drones, its governor said.

'Heinous' attack in Chernihiv

On Saturday, a Russian attack struck the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv, with the regional governor saying Sunday that seven people had been killed and 148 injured.

Zelensky vowed "a tangible answer" to the attack, which came as residents attended morning church services during the Orthodox holiday of the Transfiguration of the Lord. The president noted that a six-year-old girl was among the victims.

Denise Brown, UN humanitarian coordinator for Ukraine, said it was "heinous to attack the main square of a large city, in the morning, while people are out walking, some going to church to celebrate a religious day for many Ukrainians."

Chernihiv, 150 kilometers (90 miles) north of Kyiv, had largely been spared from major attacks since the first months of Russia's invasion launched in February 2022, as fierce fighting rages in the east and south.

Ukraine launched a counteroffensive in the east and south in June but has come up against fierce resistance from entrenched Russian forces.

Also Sunday, supporters of the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny held so-called "Putin is a Killer" rallies worldwide to mark three years since a poisoning attack on the anti-corruption activist, which he blames on the Kremlin.

Carrying signs with slogans such as "Freedom for political prisoners" and "Russia get out of Ukraine," a few dozen people protested in front of the Russian Embassy in Warsaw, while others staged demonstrations in cities including Brussels, Prague, London and Tallinn.

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