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Russia Unveils Huge Spending Hike to Battle 'Hybrid War'

By AFP

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Multipurpose armored personnel carriers produced at Kurganmashzavod being transported to the Russian airborne troops. **Alexander Alpatkin / TASS**

Russia said Thursday that it plans to raise defense spending by almost 70% next year, funneling massive resources into its Ukraine offensive to fight what it calls a "hybrid war" unleashed by the West.

With Moscow's "special military operation" now dragging through its 20th month, both sides have been digging deep and procuring weapons from allies in preparation for a protracted conflict.

The announcement came as NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg and the defense ministers of Britain and France visited Kyiv, where President Volodymyr Zelensky lobbied for more air defense systems.

"We need to get through this winter together, to protect our energy infrastructure and people's lives," Zelensky told Stoltenberg, warning of a fresh campaign of Russian strikes after last year's strikes left millions short of water and heating.

Ukraine's newly appointed defense minister Rustem Umerov, after meeting with his British counterpart Grant Shapps, said "Winter is coming but we are ready."

Ukraine has repeatedly asked for more Western weapons, including longer-range missiles, to help break through Russian positions and launch strikes deep within Russian-controlled territory.

It began its counteroffensive in June but has acknowledged slow progress as its forces encounter lines of heavily fortified Russian defenses.

'Hybrid war'

Stoltenberg acknowledged that Ukraine's army was facing "fierce fighting" as it slowly claws back territory from Russian forces, but said Kyiv was gaining ground.

"Every meter that Ukrainian forces regain is a meter that Russia loses. Moscow is fighting for imperialist delusions," he said.

The speed of Ukraine's advances has raised concerns in some Western countries over Kyiv's military strategy, but Stoltenberg again vowed that the U.S.-led defense bloc was unwavering in its support.

"NATO will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes," he told Zelensky during his unannounced visit to Kyiv. Zelensky meanwhile said it was a "matter of time" before Ukraine joins the alliance.

When the Kremlin launched its large-scale military operation in Ukraine last year it had hoped to quickly capture territory and to topple the Ukrainian government within days.

But the conflict has dragged on and Russia has ramped up arms manufacturing and pumped massive funds into its military machine, despite persistently high inflation and a weaker ruble.

According to a Finance Ministry document published Thursday, defense spending is set to jump by over 68% year-on-year to almost 10.8 trillion rubles ($111.15 billion) — more than spending allocated for social policy.

"It is obvious that such an increase is necessary, absolutely necessary, because we are in a state of hybrid war, we are continuing the special military operation," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"I'm referring to the hybrid war that has been unleashed against us," he said.

Defense spending in 2024 is set to total around three times more than education, environmental protection and healthcare spending combined, figures calculated by AFP showed.

"The focus of economic policy is shifting from an anti-crisis agenda to the promotion of national development goals," the Finance Ministry said in the document.

It said this included "strengthening the country's defense capacity" and "integrating" four Ukrainian regions Moscow claims to have annexed last year — Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

President Vladimir Putin and other officials have largely shrugged off the economic effects of the Ukraine offensive, arguing that Russia has weathered the storm of Western sanctions.

But Russia's Central Bank warned this month that economic growth was set to slow in the second half of 2023, while ordinary Russians feel the pinch from rising prices.

Drones and cruise missiles

Russia's spending plans were announced as Stoltenberg and the British and French defense ministers visited Kyiv to discuss additional military aid for Ukraine.

The visits came ahead of Kyiv's first Defense Industries Forum, where Ukrainian officials were to meet representatives from over 160 defense firms and 26 countries.

"Ukraine is now closer to NATO than ever before," Stoltenberg said at the press conference, listing measures the bloc had taken to support Ukraine.

While neither side has been able to boast significant gains on the frontline in recent weeks, both Moscow and Kyiv have launched systematic aerial attacks on strategic facilities with drones and cruise missiles.

Ukraine said earlier Thursday that Russia had deployed a "massive" drone attack overnight, adding that it had destroyed 31 of the 39 aircraft.

Russian unmanned aerial vehicles were intercepted over Black Sea coastal regions and further inland, said Nataliya Gumenyuk, spokeswoman for the Ukrainian southern military command.

Russia "is not letting up pressure and searching for new tactics: namely, with the use of mass attacks," Gumenyuk said.

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