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Zelensky Says Ukraine Has Received First F-16 Jets

By AFP

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Zelensky was standing in front of what looked like two grey, partially covered F-16s branded with the Ukrainian trident, in a location reporters were asked not to disclose for security reasons.
president.gov.ua

Ukraine has received its first batch of U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Sunday, adding that more are needed to beat back Russian forces.

For more than two years, Ukraine has pleaded with its Western partners for the aircraft — long considered the crown jewel in the sprawling list of military hardware Kyiv has sought.

"We often heard the word 'impossible'. Now it is a reality. Reality in our skies. F-16s in Ukraine. We made it happen," Zelensky said, as some flew above him during the announcement.

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with the Ukrainian trident, in a location reporters were asked not to disclose for security reasons.

"I am proud of all our guys who are mastering these aircraft and have already started using them for our country," he said.

He did not say how many jets had been delivered and declined to comment on their specific tasks, but AFP journalists saw at least two F-16s on the spot.

The announcement will likely be welcomed by many and comes as Kyiv's forces are struggling to hold back advances by Russian troops in recent weeks.

Kyiv hopes the arrival of the fighter jets — touted for their precision, speed and range — will enable it to better protect itself from Russian bombardment.

Embed:

> We are now in a new phase of development for the Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. We have done a lot to transition the Ukrainian Air Force to a new aviation standard – Western combat aviation. From the beginning of this war, we have been talking with our partners about... pic.twitter.com/z21yTU0Hjo
>
> — Volodymyr Zelenskyy / Володимир Зеленський (@ZelenskyyUa) August 4, 2024

'Not enough'

Zelensky, however, immediately warned more were needed.

"Our partners know that the number of F-16s we have in Ukraine, the number of pilots who have already been trained, is not enough," he said.

"The good news is that we are expecting additional F-16s," he added.

Several NATO countries have pledged to supply varying numbers of the fighter jets and have been training Ukrainian pilots and crews for months.

"Our guys are training a lot," Zelensky said, thanking Denmark, the Netherlands, the United States and other allies.

Amid a Russian air campaign in recent months, the president has placed Ukraine's need for improved air defenses at the top of his agenda in meetings with allies.

During an interview with AFP in May, Zelensky said Ukraine needed around 130 F-16s to secure parity with Russian air power.

Ukraine's partners, however, have promised to send fewer than 100 F-16s to date, with most likely to arrive over the course of several years following substantial pilot training.

Recent strikes on Ukrainian airfields have also raised questions about Kyiv's ability to protect the multi-million-dollar planes from Russian raids.

In early July, Russia claimed to have destroyed five military jets during a barrage on an air base in central Ukraine.

Following the bombing, Ukrainian military correspondents lambasted the air force's top brass, saying planes at the airfield had been parked in the open without sufficient protection.

Russia warned last week that any F-16s delivered to Ukraine would be shot down and claimed they would have little impact on the battlefield.

Ukraine's air force has long relied on a fleet of aging Soviet-era MiG-29 and Sukhoi jets, which have increasingly come under strain following more than two years of demanding combat missions.

The situation remains tense on the eastern front, with authorities announcing mandatory evacuations of children from several towns and villages of the Donetsk region, where Russia has been advancing.

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