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U.S. Cites Changing Russian Tactics as Reason for Reversing Landmine Policy

By AFP

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Russian soldiers near the front line. **Alexander Reka / TASS**

Washington's decision to supply Ukraine with anti-personnel landmines — marking a significant policy reversal— stems from shifts in Russian battlefield tactics prioritizing infantry over mechanized units, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Wednesday.

"They don't lead with their mechanized forces anymore," Austin said during a visit to Laos. "They lead with dismounted forces who are able to close and do things to kind of pave the way for mechanized forces."

The Ukrainians, he added, "have a need for things that can help slow down that effort on the part of the Russians."

The move comes just days after U.S. President Joe Biden authorized Ukraine to use long-range ATACMS missiles on Russian targets, a longstanding request from Kyiv.

The outgoing Biden administration appears focused on bolstering Ukraine's defenses before President-elect Donald Trump, who has criticized U.S. aid to Ukraine, assumes office. Trump has claimed he could secure a ceasefire "within hours" but has not provided details of his plan.

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In 2022, Biden announced that the U.S. would largely ban the use of landmines, contrasting this with Russia's deployment of the weapons in Ukraine. Neither Russia nor the U.S. is a signatory to the UN Mine Ban Treaty.

Ukraine, which has signed the treaty, is investigating allegations of its forces using anti-personnel mines in 2022, according to a report released Wednesday by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

The U.S. said it plans to supply Ukraine with so-called "non-persistent" mines designed to self-destruct or deactivate after a set period.

"Within two weeks, if they have not been detonated, they become inert," State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said. However, he acknowledged that Ukraine would still face the challenge of clearing unexploded ordnance after the war.

Mary Wareham, deputy director at Human Rights Watch, said Ukraine's use of the mines would violate the Mine Ban Treaty and raised concerns about the reliability of aging U.S. stockpiles.

"From a clearance perspective, de-miners have to approach any type of explosive object with the knowledge that it may explode," Wareham told AFP, adding that self-deactivation features are "not enough."

Amnesty International also called the move "a deeply disappointing setback," warning that even “non-persistent” mines pose risks to civilians.

The decision follows similar criticism over the U.S. provision of cluster munitions to Ukraine last year.

The landmines are part of a $275 million aid package that includes HIMARS rocket ammunition, TOW missiles and small arms.

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