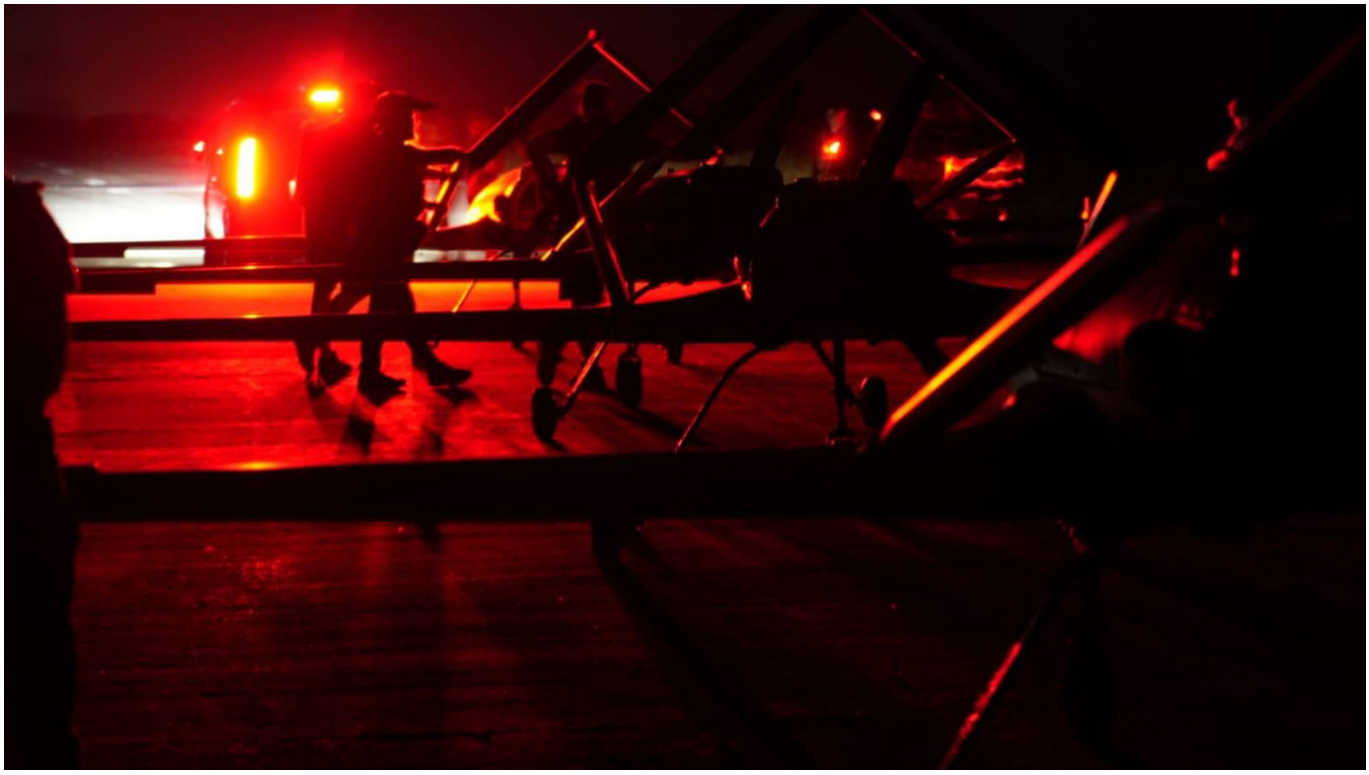
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Zelensky Eyes Trump Meeting Friday, Russia Launches Deadly Strikes

By Ania Tsoukanova for AFP and Victoria Lukovenko for AFP

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General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine

President Volodymyr Zelensky said Wednesday he hopes to visit Washington this week to meet Donald Trump and discuss future US support for Ukraine and a minerals deal that had inflamed tensions between the leaders over recent weeks.

Zelensky, who has come under mounting pressure from U.S. officials to sign the accord, told reporters — including from AFP — that Ukrainian and U.S. officials were working to confirm a meeting with Trump in Washington on Friday.

He later told a press conference that he will immediately follow the trip with talks with U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and other European leaders in Britain at the weekend.

His comments about the deal and U.S. visit came just after Russian artillery killed at least five people in Ukraine's war-battered east and a drone barrage claimed two more lives near Kyiv,

including a Ukrainian journalist.

Discussions were fraught on the minerals deal, which would grant the United States preferential access to Ukrainian natural resources in exchange for U.S. support.

Officials late on Tuesday said they had come to an agreement following protracted negotiations but Zelensky told reporters in Kyiv that more difficult work lay ahead.

"This is a start, this is a framework agreement," he told journalists.

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Further discussions between U.S. and Ukrainian officials would determine the nature of security guarantees for Ukraine and the exact sums of money at stake in the accords.

"Guarantees of peace and security are the key to preventing Russia from destroying the lives of other nations," Zelensky said in his evening video address.

However, Trump earlier brushed aside Ukraine's aspirations of joining the Atlantic defense alliance, saying: "NATO — you can forget about."

"I think that's probably the reason the whole thing started," he added, referring to the war.

'Could be great'

Zelensky had warned the "deal could be a great success or simply disappear. Whether it is a big success, I think, depends on our conversation with President Trump. We'll draw conclusions after."

Zelensky's refusal to sign a first draft of the accord delivered to him in Kyiv by the U.S. treasury secretary was met with anger by Trump, who called the Ukrainian leader a "dictator" afterward.

The Kremlin has also sought to woo Trump by lavishing praise on the U.S. leader and by encouraging American investments in natural resources in Ukrainian territory controlled by Russian forces.

Russian and U.S. diplomats will meet in Istanbul on Thursday to discuss resolving issues related to their embassies, Russia's foreign minister said, as tensions ease between the two countries.

But both Moscow and Kyiv have stepped up aerial attacks on their energy and military facilities, even as Trump pushes for a deal to end the conflict launched by Russia more than three years ago.

AFP journalists in Kyiv heard explosions ringing out after Russia launched its drone barrage, which the Ukrainian air force later said consisted of 177 drones of various types targeting regions across the country.

Deadly attacks

The Ukrinform news agency announced Wednesday afternoon that its journalist Tetiana Kulyk was among those killed in the attack.

"Her untimely death has shocked her colleagues and is a huge loss for the agency," it said in a statement.

The university where Kulyk's husband worked said it was likely that he was at home with her at the time of the strike, and authorities said they had found a second body.

And Ukraine's largest private energy company, DTEK, said one of its facilities had been damaged in the Dnipropetrovsk region, without elaborating.

On the front line, Russian forces have been clawing their way towards the town of Kostyantynivka and intensively bombarding the civilian hub in the eastern Donetsk region, which the Kremlin claims is part of Russia.

Regional authorities said five people were killed and 11 wounded in the latest strikes by Russia, which has a better-resourced and larger army across the sprawling front line.

Ukraine however announced that it had launched a successful counterattack in the Donetsk region, gaining control over the village of Kotlyne near a key transit artery and the logistics hub of Pokrovsk.

The Russian Defense Ministry said separately that its forces had gained control over two villages in the Kursk region where Ukrainian forces launched a surprise offensive in August last year.

Energy facilities damaged

Kyiv has stepped up air strikes against energy and military facilities on Russian territory in recent months, in what it says is a response to Moscow's bombardment of its cities and energy infrastructure.

Drone attacks overnight targeted the Russian regions of Bryansk and Kursk, according to the ministry.

No major damage was immediately reported by Russian media or authorities.

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