The Moscow Times
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Zelensky Seeks More Sanctions as Russian Strikes Kill 14

By Florent Vergnes for AFP

March 08, 2025



People stand near the rubble of a damaged residential building following a strike in Dobropillia, Donetsk region, on March 8. **Tetiana DZHAFAROVA / AFP**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Saturday called for more sanctions against Russia as overnight strikes killed at least 14 people and wounded dozens more, days ahead of talks between U.S. and Ukrainian negotiators aimed at securing a truce.

A Russian assault hit the center of Dobropillia in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region late on Friday, killing 11 people and wounding 30, according to the emergency services.

Separately, three people were killed and seven others wounded in a drone attack early on Saturday in the city of Bohodukhiv, the military head of the eastern Kharkiv region, Oleh Syniehubov, said.

Russia fired two missiles and 145 drones at Bogodukhiv, Ukraine's air force said.

The overnight air raids came after U.S. President Donald Trump threatened new sanctions and tariffs on Russia but said it may be "easier" to work with Moscow than Kyiv on efforts to end the three-year-long war.

"Such strikes show that Russia's goals are unchanged. Therefore, it is very important to continue to do everything to protect life, strengthen our air defense, and increase sanctions against Russia," Zelensky wrote on Telegram.

In Dobropillia, AFP saw charred residential buildings, flattened market stalls and evidence of cluster bomb damage.

Irina Kostenko, 59, spent the night cowering in her hallway with her husband. When she left the apartment building on Saturday, she saw a neighbor "lying dead on the ground, covered with a blanket."

"It was shocking, I don't have the words to describe it," Kostenko told AFP.

Zelensky said that Russia had struck Dobropillia, waited until rescuers arrived and then "deliberately" targeted them as well.

"This is a despicable and inhumane tactic of intimidation that the Russians often use," he said.

Trump sanctions threat

U.S. and Ukrainian negotiators are due to meet in Saudi Arabia next week with bilateral relations frayed.

Trump publicly berated Zelensky during a White House meeting and suspended U.S. aid to Kyiv in a stated bid to encourage diplomacy.

"I'm finding it more difficult frankly to deal with Ukraine and they don't have the cards," Trump said on Friday. "It may be easier dealing with Russia."

The remarks followed Trump on Friday threatening new sanctions and tariffs on Russia over its bombardments of Ukraine.

"To Russia and Ukraine, get to the table right now, before it is too late," he added.

Zelensky is due to land in Saudi Arabia on Monday for talks with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The meeting is a day before Ukrainian officials are expected to hold fresh talks with their U.S. counterparts on Tuesday there.

On Saturday, Russia said it had retaken three villages in its Kursk region previously captured by Ukraine.

The Russian Defense Ministry announced the recapture of Viktorovka, Nikolayevka and Staraya Sorochina.

Ukrainian soldiers launched an offensive in Kursk last summer but Russia has wrested back control of more than two-thirds of the territory captured by Kyiv.

Moscow's Defense Ministry on Saturday said its air defense systems destroyed 31 Ukrainian drones over the past night.

A Ukrainian drone attack also targeted Russia's Kirishi oil refinery, with air defense forces shooting down one drone on approach and another over the facility, Leningrad Governor Alexander Drozdenko said, adding that the "external structure of one of the reservoirs was damaged by falling debris."

A civilian was wounded by a drone attack in Belgorod district near the Ukraine border, local Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov wrote on Telegram.

Talks on track

Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed on Friday that it had carried out "precision" strikes on energy facilities.

The Ukrainian air force said it had deployed French Mirage fighter jets — delivered to Ukraine last month — for the first time to repel the aerial onslaught.

Ukrainian energy facilities in the Black Sea region of Odesa and the central Poltava region were damaged.

The latest air raids came after EU leaders, shaken by the prospect of U.S. disengagement, agreed to boost the bloc's defenses.

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