

The Russian attack on Ukraine: day 26

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According to announcements from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, there have been no significant changes in the military situation over the past 24 hours. The Ukrainian army and other armed formations have carried out strikes against groups of enemy troops trying to maintain their positions, and were successful in some directions. The enemy is maintaining its land corridor with occupied Crimea and blocking the exit to the Sea of Azov, and is concentrating its forces and resources in order to try and resume offensive operations. The Russian air force has increased its activity, continuing to launch missile and bomb attacks out of Belarusian airfields on infrastructure in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts. The Ukrainian Air Force and anti-aircraft defence batteries have hit at least nine enemy air targets (a plane, two helicopters, six UAVs and an unspecified number of missiles).

According to Ukrainian announcements, the Russians, despite having lost their offensive potential, are still mustering and transferring reserves from the Central and Eastern Military Districts to Ukraine, and are conducting covert mobilisation. Due to their high personnel losses (apart from the numerous deaths, there is a high mortality rate among the seriously injured), they have withheld the planned dismissals of officers and NCOs from military service. The invaders are continuing the practice of using personnel from logistic units for combat operations, which demonstrates that the army is in a critical situation. In the occupied part of Luhansk oblast, the aggressors are carrying out a chaotic general call-up; most of those involved have never served in the army. In the Okhtyrka region of Sumy oblast, over 300 Russian soldiers allegedly refused to carry out an order to engage in hostilities. There have also been cases of desertion from the Russian ranks.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Army presented the situation along the various lines of defence in the following terms:

- In the *Polesie* direction, the aggressors have tried to intensify the offensive, but suffered losses. The Russians have been conducting air reconnaissance to find the optimal directions to improve their position; they are trying to organise the engineer preparation of their defensive positions and restore logistical support to their sub-units.
- The opponent has not taken any active steps in the *Severn* direction. However, it is continuing to rebuild its offensive capabilities by introducing an additional battalion tactical group from the 90th Tank Division. The aggressor is trying to organise the engineer preparation of its defence positions, and restore combat capability and logistical support to their sub-units. Russian troops are shelling Chernihiv and other towns. They have not yet given up trying to attack Brovary, but because of the significant losses they have incurred,

they are unable to move forward.

- In the *Slobodka* direction, the invaders have not made any active moves. They are still partially blocking Sumy and trying to cut off Kharkiv with the forces available to them, and have launched artillery fire at the military & civilian facilities in this city and in Chuhuyev. Fighting for Izyum and its vicinity continues; here the aggressor has strengthened its forces and created a fortification system. Russian security sub-units are trying to open the Kupiansk-Valuyki railway line to improve their supply lines.
- In the Donetsk and Luhansk directions, the aggressor has been unsuccessfully trying to advance and gain new footholds, suffering losses and being forced to withdraw. Russian units are conducting offensive operations and firing along the entire line of contact between the fighting troops. The Russians have allegedly lost nearly 300 soldiers.
- In the Southern Buzhany direction, the enemy has gone into defensive in the positions it previously occupied, restoring its combat capability and replenishing supplies. As a result of a counterattack by Ukrainian sub-units from Mikolayiv, they have been forced to retreat to inconvenient positions.
- The despatches from the 26th day of the fighting did not refer to events in the *Taurida* direction (also known as the *Pryazovsky* direction).

According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the Russians are still having significant problems with logistics, and the units operating in Ukraine apparently have ammunition and food reserves for no more than three days. The situation with the provision of tank fuel is similar; the Russians have failed to arrange its deliveries via the pipeline network. The repair of damaged weapons and military equipment is also a challenge. A repair point has been organised in Zaporizhzhia oblast, with the involvement of specialists brought in from Russia, among others.

The Ukrainian General Staff have also reported the losses that the enemy suffered on 21 March. Ukrainian forces destroyed 14 tanks, 8 infantry fighting vehicles, 2 floating MTLB armoured personnel carriers, 3 artillery systems and 4 wheeled vehicles, and Russian casualties amounted to about 300 soldiers. The defenders of Mariupol destroyed a Raptor patrol boat and a Leer-3 electronic warfare system. According to Ukrainian sources, since 24 February the Russians have lost about 15,300 soldiers, 509 tanks, 1556 infantry fighting vehicles and armoured vehicles, 252 artillery systems, 80 multiple rocket launchers, 45 air defence systems, 99 aircraft, 123 helicopters, 1000 wheeled vehicles, 70 fuel tanks and 35 unmanned aerial vehicles. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, since 24 February the Ukrainian Armed Forces have lost 1528 tanks and armoured vehicles, 230 drones, 181 air defence systems, 154 rocket launchers, 602 guns and mortars, and 1312 wheeled vehicles.

The website of the pro-Kremlin tabloid newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* was the target of a hacker attack, most probably carried out by the Ukrainian secret services or individuals who have volunteered to support Ukraine in the cyber war. An official statement from the Russian Ministry of Defence on the losses of the Russian forces was updated to include the figures of 9861 killed and 16,153 wounded. The editors of the website confirmed that the website had been hacked; the information was available online for several hours before being taken down.

Information is coming in from local authorities around Russia about the funerals of soldiers who died in Ukraine. The list numbers 557 people and is far from complete. In some regions of Russia, media that have reported the deaths of local soldiers have begun to remove such announcements under pressure from the security services. Official data on the losses were released only once (2 March), when the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation confirmed the deaths of 498 soldiers. According to the Ukrainian intelligence services, the Russians are campaigning in the Belarusian army to justify the possible entry of some of its units onto Ukrainian territory.

The Ukrainian Interior Ministry reports that 1271 prosecutions concerning crimes against national security have been initiated since 24 February. Of these, 922 concerned activities aimed at undermining the territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine's borders, 244 were for high treason (including the transmission of classified data to the Russian services and the army), 48 for acts of sabotage, and 57 were of a criminal nature. The ministry emphasised that some of the detainees came from the temporarily occupied territories or had arrived in Ukraine from other countries. In Transcarpathia, the Ukrainian security services interrupted an operation by the Russian FSB, which was aimed at provoking the Hungarian minority to take steps to separate the region from Ukraine. The report emphasised that most of the information about the Russian operation had come from representatives of the Hungarian minority.

The aggressor's army continues to loot the towns it has occupied. In the vicinity of Hostomel in Kyiv oblast, it has been documented that armoured vehicles have removed stolen utility items. The Ukrainian security services intercepted conversations from Russian soldiers informing their families that they had acquired televisions, household appliances, perfumes and money.

On 21 March, seven of the eight agreed humanitarian corridors were in operation, and a total of 8057 people were evacuated, including around 3000 from Mariupol. Some of the bus columns that left the city were fired upon by the invaders, as a result of which four children were injured. The mayor of Borispol (30 km east of the capital) called on the civilian population to leave, in order to facilitate the work of the armed forces. On 22 March, the authorities continued their attempts to open humanitarian corridors from Mariupol & Berdyansk to Zaporizhzhia. Ukrainian Railways are organising departures of more evacuation trains from Kharkiv, Kyiv, Dnipro, Kramatorsk, Kryvyi Rih and Odesa towards Uzhhorod and Lviv. The inclusion of trains from Odesa in the timetable proves that the city is expecting a possible attack by the enemy.

According to information provided by the Polish Border Guard, 2.14 million people have crossed the border with Poland since the beginning of the war; on 21 March around 30,000 more arrived (a drop of 11% compared to the previous day).

Some supermarket chains have decided to temporarily close some of their outlets in Kyiv and the Kyiv oblast. Only 34 out of 130 ATB stores and 115 out of 146 Silpo supermarkets will operate. The reason is the growing logistical difficulties they are having ensuring supplies. The National Bank of Ukraine has introduced a limit of withdrawals from accounts to 100,000 hryvnia (about US\$3400) per month for persons resident abroad. The limit does not apply to cashless transactions, if they are being used to pay for the costs of education, treatment and the transport of sick people.

The government has approved monthly payments to refugees, in the amount of 2000 hryvnia per adult and 3000 hryvnia per child (about US\$70 and US\$100 respectively). These funds can be obtained through the state-run *Diia* mobile application. In addition, the authorities have initiated the process of employing IDPs: entrepreneurs will receive 6500 hryvnia (about US\$220) a month for each person they hire. On 21 March, the state also began to pay out a one-time allowance in the amount of 6500 hryvnia to people who live in areas under combat. According to the Ministry of Economy, so far 40 companies have moved their activities from areas where hostilities are taking place, and 300 are in the process of relocation.

President Volodymyr Zelenskiy reiterated that a personal meeting between himself and Vladimir Putin was crucial to achieving peace. He also stated that Ukraine is in favour of peace, even if its terms are difficult, but in negotiations it expects dialogue, not ultimatums. Any future agreement is to be approved in a nationwide referendum. Zelenskiy called on EU members (in particular Germany) to stop trading with Russia, as it is from these funds that the aggressor is financing its war machine. He also reiterated that NATO would not admit Ukraine out of fear of Russia, even though several of the Alliance's members were ready to give Kyiv security guarantees.

Commentary

- The armed hostilities are positional in nature, and – contrary to the announcements by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine – the Russian army is constantly attacking. In the south, it is exploiting gaps in the defence lines to expand the area under its control. In all combat areas the Russian army is posing an increasingly serious threat to the life and health of the civilians; the randomness of its attacks proves that they are not planned, but the Russian command has consented to them. The Ukrainian units are trying to defend themselves by any means available, including the use of local civilian infrastructure, and as a result, Russian attacks cause civilian and military casualties, which is confirmed by reports by the authorities of attacked localities. However, while the aggressor has been unscrupulously using the inhabitants as human shields, the Ukrainian defenders are trying to evacuate civilians from the combat areas by any means possible.
- Due to information warfare being waged by both sides of the conflict, the data provided about each side's losses are to a large extent either overestimated or underestimated. The fact is, however, that the aggressor is clearly trying to conceal its losses, especially human ones. Residual information from local authorities in Russia (which is almost immediately censored) suggests that the number of Russian soldiers killed may, according to various estimates, number between 5000 and 9000. It is also noteworthy that the Russians have not provided any data on Ukrainian losses, which may mean that they are much lower.
- In recent days the number of people leaving Ukraine has been steadily declining. However, this does not mean there will not be another wave of refugees. That can be expected as the front line approaches the large cities in the eastern part of the country (Kryvyi Rih, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia). In addition, there are at least 7 million IDPs in Ukraine. As the country's economic situation deteriorates and the savings of people who have left their places of residence start to run out, these people may be more inclined to leave the country. The financial support for refugees offered by the government is not sufficient to improve their situation.