

The Russians have surrounded Bakhmut. Day 333 of the war

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Communiqués from the Ukrainian General Staff indicate that Russian forces are tightening their grip around Bakhmut. Enemy subunits are being held back on the north-western outskirts of the town (Krasna Hora, Paraskoviivka, Yahidne) and south of the Bakhmut-Kostiantynivka road, including on the western side of the Donetsk-Donbas canal (Predtechyne, Stupochky), which they have now crossed. The Russians are also expanding the area of their assault to the northwest of Soledar, where they have crossed the Bakhmut-Siversk road at Vasyukivka. The aggressor's offensive is being contained south and east of Siversk, in the Avdiivka area, and in an arc west of Donetsk, where fighting for control of the city of Marinka continues. Clashes have also occurred in the Luhansk oblast, on the border with Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts; the fighting there is mainly taking place between Kreminna and Siversk.

Reports that fighting in the Zaporizhzhia oblast resumed in mid-January remain unconfirmed. According to the Ukrainian command, the enemy is conducting battle reconnaissance and trying to improve its tactical situation. Russian attacks on the defenders' positions occur regularly, but they have been carried out in small groups, and no offensive actions on a larger scale have been reported. The regions of the nodal towns of Kamianske (on the River Dnieper, 30 km south of Zaporizhzhia), Orikhiv and Huliaipole have been indicated as the main targets of the Russian strike. The attackers have been making field advances south of these towns, most likely by seizing part of an earlier strip of no-man's land.

The Russians are still shelling and bombarding the Ukrainian forces' positions and facilities along the line of contact and in border areas, especially in Sumy oblast (which was shelled 115 times on 21 January alone). The attackers are continuing to destroy localities in the right-bank part of Kherson oblast, and its capital is under permanent fire. In the Nikopol oblast, however, Marhanets has become the main target. Due to the repeated shelling of the Ochakiv area, the local authorities there have appealed to residents of the communities of Ochakiv and Kutsurub not to return to their abandoned homes. The Russians have also continued to launch rocket attacks, including on Kramatorsk, Huliaipole and the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia.

On 20 January, the eighth meeting of the contact group of countries supporting Ukraine militarily (the so-called Ramstein group) took place; the decisions Kyiv had expected regarding the supply of Western tanks to the Ukrainian army were not taken. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, who chaired the meeting, confirmed some of the commitments made earlier, specifically the transfer to Ukraine of Patriot air defence systems from the

Netherlands and NASAMS from Canada (purchased from an American manufacturer). In contrast to Ukrainian reports that the Dutch would supply them with a third Patriot battery (after the US and Germany), Amsterdam will now hand over only two launchers of this system.

The Polish defence ministry has announced that it will equip and train a Ukrainian armoured brigade by the end of March (it will consist of the T-72 tanks and BWP-1 infantry fighting vehicles which are still at the Polish army's disposal). Warsaw has also announced its intention to start training Ukrainian tank crewmen how to handle Leopard-2 tanks. Portugal has plans to transfer 14 M113 tracked transporters (Lisbon handed over a similar number of M113s to equip a second company in 2022) and 120 mm-calibre ammunition to Ukraine. Cyprus has expressed its readiness to provide the Ukrainian army with T-80U tanks if it acquires Leopard-2 tanks in exchange, while Italy and France are finalising preparations to transfer SAMP/T air defence systems to Ukraine.

Ukrainian defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov expressed his satisfaction at the results of the Ramstein group meeting. He stressed that in addition to the information made public, "some packages were [also] announced behind closed doors". He reported that several countries are to begin training Ukrainian tank crewmen how to operate Leopard tanks. He also confirmed that three Sea King helicopters had arrived in Ukraine from the UK. The commander of the Combined Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Serhiy Nayev, announced that work had started on the formation of Ukrainian army units adapted to the use of Western tanks and armoured combat vehicles.

The Algerian industry website Menadefense reported that in mid-January the Ukrainian army began using nearly 20 T-72B tanks acquired from Morocco, which the Czech firm Excalibur had overhauled and modernised to a limited extent. At the same time, it recalled that Morocco had supplied Ukraine with spare parts for post-Soviet tanks in 2022 under an agreement with the US. Rabat acquired 148 post-Soviet tanks from Belarus in the late 20th century.

According to Ukrainian government estimates, the Russians have deported more than two million Ukrainians from the temporarily occupied territories since last February. A process of forced 'passportisation' is underway: those who refuse to accept Russian documents cannot receive any social benefits or take up employment. The Russian tactic is intended to create conditions of humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories, terrorise the local population with bombings, create panic, and then transfer the intimidated population to Russia's Southern Federal District (mainly the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions).

On 21 January, a joint training exercise was held for forces in the Chernobyl zone to protect the nuclear power plant. Units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Guard, the State Border Guard, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the National Police took part in the exercise. On the same day, counter-intelligence operations were carried out under the SBU's supervision in a suburban district of Kyiv. It was emphasised that the operation was aimed at strengthening the anti-sabotage defence of critical infrastructure facilities.

Also on 21 January, Ukrainian military intelligence representative Andriy Yusov said that media reports of a direct military threat from Belarus are part of a Russian psychological operation. He added that there is currently no chance of a full-scale ground operation being

launched from the north.

On 22 January, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the military command had been instructed to create reserves, which would allow soldiers previously engaged in combat the opportunity to “recuperate”. He admitted that this was difficult due to injuries, as well as the mental state of those fighting at the front. He noted that he could not disclose details of the mobilisation processes. He also stressed that the Ukrainian army’s most important resource is the people, who must be protected.

On 22 January, commenting on the resignation of the deputy minister for the development of communities, territories and infrastructure Vasyl Lozynsky (who was detained while accepting a \$400,000 bribe), President Zelensky pointed to the growing threat of corruption among senior government officials. He announced that the authorities would inspect financial issues in relations between the government and the regions, as well as in military procurement. The day before, Ukrainian media circulated reports about a corruption scandal at the defence ministry, which had entered into a contract to purchase food products for the armed forces for two to three times more than the market prices. The unfavourable contract was allegedly signed by the director of the Defence Ministry’s procurement department, who is suspected in a case opened last August of having embezzled \$580,000 in funds earmarked for the purchase of ammunition. Defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov dismissed the allegations, describing them as deliberate manipulation and misrepresentation. He added that he had asked the SBU to investigate the publications which “slandered” his ministry. On 23 January, the head of the Servant of the People parliamentary faction, David Arakhamia, stated that corrupt officials would be held accountable under martial law, and that the authorities would intensify their anti-corruption measures.

Commentary

- With the departure of Russian forces to the area of the main roads north and west of Bakhmut, the town now finds itself in a state of operational siege. Ukrainian troops have retained relative freedom of movement along local roads to Kramatorsk via Chasiv Yar, but this link has also come within range of enemy artillery. Considering the invaders’ previous gains in the northeast (especially the seizure of Soledar) and the pressure on the defenders’ positions west of the Donetsk-Donbas canal, it will be increasingly hard for the Ukrainians to hold Bakhmut. However, it should be assumed that Ukrainian forces will continue to defend the town and take steps to maintain at least one of the main supply routes and, as their equipment capabilities are replenished, to unblock it. This is because Kyiv is consistently trying to prevent the loss of any further territory in the Donbas and to maintain the appearance in the new media that the defence is being conducted effectively (for example, the Ukrainian media have still not officially confirmed the loss of Soledar); the government sees this as a precondition for maintaining high morale among the ranks of the defenders.
- The reports in recent days about corruption and fraud signals the risk of such crimes increasing among government officials; to this end, the Ukrainian authorities have declared that they will take strong action to combat these problems. In the near future, we should expect the services responsible for detecting and prosecuting economic and corruption crimes to conduct extensive activities to verify the integrity of central government personnel. One precondition for the effectiveness of this drive will be how

quickly a new head of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine is chosen. This office, which interacts with the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, bears special responsibility for the process of cleansing the state's bodies of corrupt individuals.