Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 9.02.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Fierce battles for Bakhmut. Day 350 of the war

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The General Staff of the Ukrainian Army has reported that the enemy's offensive northwest of Bakhmut has been halted in some places, as have the attacks taking place in the area south of the M03 highway leading to Sloviansk (Orikhovo-Vasylivka, Dubovo-Vasylivka). Russian forces have severed the Bakhmut-Kostiantynivka road link, and are continuing their assault on Chasiv Yar, through which runs the last potential supply route to Bakhmut, which is the main arena of fighting. Ukrainian forces are also trying to hold off the attackers in towns on Bakhmut's northern and southwestern outskirts. The Russians approached Siversk from the south, but failed to break through the Ukrainian positions east and southeast of the city; they also tried unsuccessfully to launch an attack in the Avdiivka area and in an arc west of Donetsk, where there was another intensification in the fighting for Marinka.

Ukrainian sources indicate that the Russians have broken through the defences in the Vuhledar region, but are being held back northwest of it. They have also tried unsuccessfully to attack in the western part of Donetsk oblast and in Zaporizhzhia oblast, west of Orikhiv. Russian pressure on Ukrainian defence lines on the Luhansk oblast's border with the Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts is expected to grow stronger.

Russian missiles have hit industrial facilities in Kharkiv (five missiles hit aerospace plants currently engaged in drone repair), Semenivka in the Chernihiv, and the town of Sumy, as well as the defenders' hinterland in the Kramatorsk and Sloviansk regions. Enemy artillery and aviation is still shelling and bombarding the Ukrainian forces' positions and support facilities along the line of contact and in border areas. Shelling is continuing in Kherson and its surroundings, as well as the Nikopol and Ochakiv areas. Ukrainian acts of sabotage were reported in Berdyansk (twice) and Mariupol, and, according to Russian sources, once more in the Bryansk oblast.

On 7 February, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark announced that they intend to jointly purchase, refurbish and transfer to Ukraine no fewer than 100 Leopard 1A5-tanks ('at least three battalions') stored by German private companies. Earlier, Berlin authorised the export of up to 178 tanks of the same type: 88 from the Rheinmetall corporation's inventory which had previously been used by the Bundeswehr, and 90 held by the Flensburger Fahrzeugbau Gesellschaft (FFG), which had been withdrawn several years ago from service in the Danish army. According to Germany's defence minister Boris Pistorius, up to 25 tanks are expected to arrive in Ukraine this summer, up to 80 tanks by the end of 2023, and up to 100 by the second quarter of 2024. The number of tanks eventually delivered will depend on how much work is needed to bring them back into service. This package, which is being referred to as

the Leopard Initiative, will also include supplies of ammunition and spare parts, as well as training for Ukrainian tank crews. Belgium is also expected to express its intention to join the Leopard Initiative. According to unofficial reports, the Ukrainian army will receive 25,000 pieces of 105-mm ammunition along with the tanks; there are also plans to resume the production of ammunition of this calibre.

The German and Polish defence ministers have agreed that next week (most likely on 14 February, during the next meeting of the Ramstein group) they will meet the defence ministers of a coalition of countries, with the aim of setting up a joint project to equip and transfer two battalions of Leopard-2 tanks to Ukraine. According to Pistorius, this coalition has not yet been finally formed. Binding decisions have so far been taken by Poland, Germany and Canada (which together can offer 32 Leopards in two versions), and on 8 February they were joined by Portugal, whose prime minister announced the transfer of three Leopard-2A6 tanks to Ukraine in March this year.

The Lithuanian defence ministry has announced that it has completed training Ukrainian instructors in the use of 40-mm Bofors L/70 automatic anti-aircraft guns, and has handed over dozens of them (40 were previously reported) along with ammunition. He also confirmed that Lithuania plans to train nearly 1600 Ukrainian servicemen by the end of the year. On 6 February, a group of Ukrainian servicemen arrived in the UK to receive training in handling 155-mm AS90 self-propelled howitzers. By the end of the month, the Ukrainian army should receive more guided missiles, five Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns (two of which have already arrived in Ukraine) and five Pionierpanzer-2A1 Dachs armoured engineering vehicles from Germany. Another five Biber tank bridges are expected to arrive in Ukraine in March.

During his visit to the UK, President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that an agreement had been reached to provide Ukraine with ‘a large number’ of armoured and long-range weapons, and that the training of Ukrainian pilots would begin. British PM Rishi Sunak, for his part, was said to have instructed the Defence Ministry to study what kind of combat aircraft the British could potentially provide to Ukraine. However, UK government officials have stated that this is a long-term solution, and no decision on whether to transfer the planes has yet been taken. Sunak confirmed that the first Ukrainian pilots are expected to arrive for training in the spring, although it will be limited to training aircraft.

According to the Secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defence Council Oleksiy Danilov, Russian troops are testing the defences of Ukrainian forces in the Zaporizhzhia oblast. He added that Kyiv is not ruling out the chance of a Russian offensive in the Kharkiv oblast, from where enemy forces were pushed out last summer. Danilov also reiterated earlier predictions that Russia still wants to seize the entire Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts first. At the same time, he stressed that an attack from Belarusian territory should not be expected.

Ukraine’s interior ministry is continuing to recruit volunteer assault troops. More than 8000 people have already registered; they will join the formations which are expected to fight on the front lines and take part in the liberation of occupied territories. The minister revealed that most of those interested have opted to join one of the National Guard’s 6 brigades, while others are interested in serving in the assault formations of the National Police and the National Border Service. On 8 February, the National Guard’s spokesman Ruslan

Muzychuk admitted that the volunteer assault units are being created with the aim of supporting the mobilisation process and accelerate the use of reserves.

On 7 February, the Ukrainian parliament extended martial law and general mobilisation for another 90 days (as of 19 February). On that day it also reconfirmed Vasyl Malyuk as head of Ukraine's Security Service. Malyuk has served in that position since 18 July 2022 following the resignation of Ivan Bakanov, who was sacked by the president for his ineptitude in leading the service. Malyuk has been with the security organs for more than two decades, specialising in the fight against corruption and organised crime. Parliament also approved the candidacy of former National Police chief Ihor Klymenko to head the interior ministry. In justifying the candidacies of Malyuk and Klymenko, President Zelensky stressed that he wanted to direct more people with 'war experience' into state administration, including at the local level. The president's words were corroborated by his decision to appoint new heads of the regional authorities in Dnipro, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia who had previously been affiliated with the Security Service or the National Police.

Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov, who the media has accused of failing to deal with officials who commit corruption and fraud crimes, has announced further organisational changes at the ministry. The Defence Ministry will soon establish an anti-corruption department, and there are also plans to set up an anti-corruption board in which social activists will participate. The non-governmental Anti-Corruption Action Centre has rejected Reznikov's proposal, indicating that it has no confidence in the ministry's current leadership.

On 8 February, the president's representative in parliament Fedir Venislavsky confirmed that the Servant of the People party had discussed firing the head of the defence ministry and appointing the head of military intelligence to the post, but stressed that these were 'hypothetical' considerations, and that any such decision lay within the president's exclusive competence. The parliamentary committee on national security, defence and intelligence announced that it was restoring parliamentary control over defence procurement, including armaments, equipment, materiel and fuel.

On 9 February, Gwynne Shotwell, the president and chief operating officer of Elon Musk's company SpaceX, addressed reports that the Ukrainian military was using Starlink devices to control drones. She stressed that using Starlinks for military purposes was beyond the scope of the contract with the Ukrainian government; they were intended for humanitarian purposes, such as providing broadband internet to hospitals, banks and families affected by the Russian invasion. Earlier a representative of the Russian foreign ministry, Konstantin Vorontsov, said that Russia may consider Western commercial satellites as legitimate targets if they are used to help Ukraine in the war.

Commentary

- Reports from the Ukrainian General Staff indicate that Russian forces have already cut both of Bakhmut's main road links to Kramatorsk and Slavyansk, and have been attempting to break through Ukrainian positions south of their last available supply route (in the area of the town of Chasiv Yar) since 7 February. However, it should be assumed that the situation – at least northwest of Bakhmut – is not turning out too badly for the defenders right now. Indeed, the communiqués from the General Staff of the Ukrainian

army speak about repelling the enemy's attacks not only in terms of the Russians' unsuccessful attempts to attack the defenders' positions, but also the dismantling of their sabotage and reconnaissance groups (SRGs). The latter category most likely includes the Staff's reports that the Ukrainian forces have halted Russian attacks south of the M03 highway. The operations in the area of the villages mentioned in these communiqués (Orikhovo-Vasylivka, Dubovo-Vasylivka) have so far not been confirmed by any other sources. The fighting is still centred on the crossroads to the east of them on the northern outskirts of Bakhmut, where the highway intersects with the road to Siversk. Nevertheless, the mere fact that Russian GDRs have successfully infiltrated that area indicates that the highway is most likely no longer being used as a supply route, and is therefore not properly protected.

- The creation of volunteer assault units under the aegis of the Ukrainian Interior Ministry is an initiative that confirms that the government is attaching great importance to quickly replenishing the losses it has suffered at the front. The principle of voluntary service guarantees that motivated soldiers, some of whom will already have had frontline experience, will join the units. This will make it possible in part to support the ongoing mobilisation efforts in Ukraine and, as announced, to quickly replenish the forces fighting in the Donbas.
- The formation of the Leopard Initiative, within which a group of Western European countries intends to refurbish and transfer Leopard-1A5 tanks to Ukraine, confirms that Ukraine's partners are unwilling to transfer greater numbers of the relatively modern armoured weapons remaining in their armed forces at the expense of depleting their own capabilities. We may see the Leopard Initiative as a reaction to the increasingly apparent failure to build a coalition of countries which could have provided the Ukrainian army with two battalions of Leopard-2A4 tanks (which were originally envisioned to include 80–88 units) by this spring.
- Transferring more of the older Leopards to Ukraine entails logistical problems. The Leopard-1 is a so-called second-generation tank, which was the basis of modern armoured armies in the 1970s, just like the T-62M which the Russians have used in Ukraine in limited numbers (for auxiliary tasks, mainly as so-called fire points at fortified outposts). If the Leopard-1s are to be used in the longer term, it will be necessary to resume production in the West not only of their ammunition (something which has already been unofficially announced), but also of their spare parts; both the former and the latter have mostly been already disposed of and scrapped. Replenishing those stocks will take at least a year to achieve. Brazil, the main current user of modified Leopard-1 tanks, said in January that it had refused to supply Germany with ammunition or servicing support. The first 20–25 vehicles Ukraine is to receive in the summer will most likely be used entirely for the basic training of young tank crews. And for all these reasons, the Leopard-1 tanks will only marginally increase the Ukrainian army's offensive potential.