

The Ukrainians are not surrendering Bakhmut. Day 375 of the war

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Russian forces continue offensive operations to the northeast and south of Chasiv Yar, through which some of Bakhmut's defenders are being withdrawn and supplies are transported for the Ukrainian soldiers remaining in the town. Moving along dirt roads, Ukrainians are being fired upon with virtually all weapons. The invaders have slowed their efforts to physically close the ring of encirclement by halting their attacks from the north on Khromove/Artemivske (the town lost its logistical importance after the destruction of the bridge and, according to some sources, was abandoned by Ukrainian troops) and by reducing their frequency from the south on Ivanivske/Krasne. However, they have not ceased their pressure on Bakhmut's defenders. Ukrainian forces in the city are being pushed from the north and south towards the centre, their groups are still expected to resist also on the east bank of the Bakhmutka River. According to the Ukrainian command, communications with Bakhmut are being maintained and there is no question of a complete withdrawal (mainly wounded soldiers will be evacuated).

Russian troops have renewed attacks on both sides of the M03 highway north-west of Bakhmut, as well as east of Siversk and north and south-west of Kreminna. Fighting continues north and west of Avdiivka and in an arc west of Donetsk. The Russians were expected to make further attempts to break through enemy positions south of the completely ruined Marinka, where Ukrainian defences still hold. Local authorities have ordered the evacuation of some residents from Kupiansk, which is said to be under constant fire. However, information on clashes over villages on its north-eastern outskirts is unclear. According to the Ukrainian side, the number of enemy attacks still remains significant, with more than 150 on Friday, 130 on Saturday and 95 on Sunday.

On the night of 6 March, the Russians launched a limited attack using Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones, and the defenders are thought to have shot down 13 of a total of 15. The main target of rocket strikes remains the rear of Ukrainian forces in the Donbas, with attacks including Kramatorsk and the Pokrovsk area. Russia's artillery and aviation continue shelling and bombing along the contact lines and in border areas, especially in the Sumy Oblast. Outside the combat areas, Kherson and Nikopol and the surrounding areas, as well as the coastal areas of Mykolaiv Oblast, especially near Ochakiv, continue to be the main targets. Ukrainian sabotage in Melitopol resulted in explosions in the area of two Russian military bases on 5 March.

The Pentagon gave details of the next military aid package to Ukraine. It is worth \$400 million, and includes HIMARS launcher missiles (previously reported to be GMLRS guided missiles), 155-mm and 105-mm calibre artillery ammunition, 25-mm cartridges (for Bradley infantry fighting vehicles) and armoured vehicle launched bridges (most likely AVLB based on the M60 tank). According to Ukraine's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Vadym Prystaiko, during President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the UK, it was agreed that London would supply Kyiv with twice as many tanks as previously announced (i.e. 28 instead of 14). The Serhiy Prytula Foundation has handed over to the Ukrainian army the first 24 armoured personnel carriers out of a total of 101 vehicles of various types purchased in the UK and withdrawn from service from the army there (the package is to include FV103 Spartan, FV104 Samaritan, FV105 Sultan, Stormer, Shielder, FV432 Bulldog, FV434 and FV106 Samson machines).

The Financial Times reported that Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov has asked his counterparts in European Union countries to transfer 250,000 artillery munitions every month. Currently, the Ukrainian army can only use a fifth of the ammunition deemed necessary for its tasks – 110,000 155-mm calibre shells per month compared to the 594,000 demanded. Kyiv considers 356,000 shells to be the necessary minimum, estimated at 60% of the required total. According to Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu, on 7–8 March the heads of the defence ministries of EU countries will discuss a mechanism for the joint purchase of one million 155-mm artillery shells for Ukraine. According to Reznikov, Russian forces are using four times more shells than the Ukrainians. The supreme commander of allied forces in Europe – US General Christopher Cavoli – estimated the Russian artillery usage at more than 23,000 shells per day.

On 5 March, NBC News reported that two Ukrainian pilots were in the United States undergoing pilot skills assessments on simulators at the Tucson base in Arizona. Washington was expected to approve a similar assessment of ten more soldiers in March. The US government has stressed that the programme is not for training purposes and that the pilots will not be at the controls of aircraft while in the US. They also reiterate that they do not plan to transfer F-16 fighters to Kyiv. The following day, Air Force Command spokesman Colonel Yuriy Ihnat said that studies were being undertaken to ascertain how long the pilots would need to retrain for modern fighters. Based on the assessment, further steps are to be taken in terms of training and the acquisition of Western fighter aircraft.

On 5 March, Ihnat confirmed reports that the Russians were using new UPAB-1500W guided wing bombs, which weigh 1.5 tonnes and are dropped about 40km from the target. He indicated that the way to reduce the effectiveness of enemy air attacks was to acquire modern fighter aircraft. A day later, Reznikov clarified that Ukraine needs fighter aircraft such as the F-16, whose combat capabilities can reduce the effectiveness of enemy air attacks. He added that attack aircraft designed to destroy ground targets, such as the A-10 Thunderbolt II, do not meet the requirements due to depletion and a lack of spare parts. He also stated that the mobilisation plan announced with the introduction of martial law has not been completed. Currently, drivers, artillerymen and sharpshooters in particular are being sought, while the disruptions in mobilisation are due to the lack of digital personnel databases, which are only just being created.

On 4 March, Ukraine's Deputy Defence Minister Oleksandr Pavlyuk said that, due to the lack of success at the front, the Russians' desperation is growing and their tactics are becoming increasingly terrorist in nature. The enemy is shelling civilian targets and infrastructure providing basic social needs. According to Pavlyuk, in order to ensure the proper functioning of local communities in the frontline territories, it is necessary to implement military administrations. He stressed that local authorities cannot be a political representation, as in times of war they are first and foremost the decision-making centres directing the facilities of the armed forces.

The Belarusian Centre for the Defence of Human Rights 'Viasna' has reported that the KGB is conducting searches on individuals who have come into conflict with the law, including for administrative offences, and those who have owned commercial drones between 2020 and 2023. Preliminary data shows that at least ten people were detained and taken into custody after the search. Officers are to search for the organisers of the incident at Machulishchy military airport, where a Russian A-50 early warning aircraft was allegedly damaged using drones. Official Belarusian sources deny any material damage. According to independent sources, the aircraft left the airport on its own and was diverted to Taganrog for repairs.

On 4 March, the general prosecutors of the countries that are part of the joint investigation team (Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine) signed an agreement in Lviv to establish the International Centre for the Investigation of Crimes of Russian Aggression in The Hague. It will become operational in July this year and, in Kyiv's view, will contribute to the establishment of a special tribunal to 'judge the crimes of aggression committed by Russia's political-military elite'. A day earlier, US Attorney General Merrick Garland visited Lviv. He took part in the United for Justice conference, where speakers included the President of Latvia, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands, the Minister of Justice of Poland and the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. The event was dedicated to the issue of holding Russia accountable for war crimes.

Commentary

- The Russians' slowdown in their efforts to encircle Bakhmut must be linked to their achievement of full operational encirclement. The communication of the defenders with the city is limited not only by the terrain, but above all by the aggressor's shelling – the slowing down of traffic on the dirt roads contributes to the accuracy. It remains an open question to what extent the slowdown in efforts to encircle Bakhmut is dictated by the invaders' desire to limit their own losses and give respite to the attacking troops, and to what extent it is in order to take advantage of the current situation to further exhaust Ukrainian forces and tie them up in the Bakhmut area under conditions of intensified operations on other directions – Avdiivka, Lyman and Kupiansk. This is supported by declarations by representatives of the Ukrainian authorities about the strategic importance of the city, which indicate that its retention is prestigious in nature. Thus, the surrender of Bakhmut is treated as a last resort and it still cannot be ruled out that the Ukrainians will attempt to retake it. Currently, the main direction of the Russian attack is Chasiv Yar and the localities north of it, on the strip of hills between Bakhmut and Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. These form the last natural line of defence of the north-western part of the Donetsk Oblast.