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Ukrainian forces counter Russian attempts to encircle Bakhmut and Avdiivka. Day 393 of the war

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Bakhmut and Avdiivka are still the main areas of fighting, as Russian forces (including units of the Wagner Group and the 1st Donetsk Army Corps) continue their operations to encircle both towns. Around Bakhmut, clashes are mainly taking place on the city's north-western outskirts, where Ukrainian forces are managing to hold their positions on the line between the villages of Khromove, Bohdanivka and Orikhovo-Vasylivka. Street fighting is continuing in Bakhmut itself, with particularly intense clashes in the city's southern part, where the invaders have been trying unsuccessfully to capture a section of the T 0504 road leading to Kostiantynivka, which is the defenders' main transport route. At Avdiivka, despite heavy artillery fire and aerial bombardment, the aggressor has failed to make any significant progress or to outflank the enemy's positions over the past two days. For the time being, the defenders are holding several roads that provide them with access to the rear support area. Clashes are also ongoing to the west of Kreminna, where Russian forces have been advancing slowly towards the Oskil river. According to a statement from the Ukrainian side, the use of armoured weapons, including the relatively modern T-80 and T-90 tanks, has increased noticeably in this direction in recent days. There have been no significant changes at Mariinka, or on the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson fronts.

On 22 March, the invaders shelled Zaporizhzhia from multiple rocket launchers, probably Tornado-Ss, while on the night of 23 to 24 March, S-300 missiles hit a civilian facility (a so-called point of invulnerability) in Kostiantynivka, killing at least five people. Missile attacks were also carried out against Kramatorsk and Avdiivka. In addition, the attackers shelled a number of towns along the border (in the Chernihiv, Sumy and Kharkiv oblasts) and used mortars, barrel artillery and rocket systems in the frontline zone. Outside the area of direct combat, Kherson suffered the most, with five incidents of shelling, all aimed at civilian targets, on 22 March alone. The following day, the Russian military attempted to attack Odesa with Kh-59 air-to-ground missiles launched from Su-35 aircraft over the Black Sea; according to a Ukrainian statement, both missiles were shot down. On the night of 23 to 24 March, Kryvyi Rih was targeted by six Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones, one of which was shot down by anti-aircraft defences. The effects of this air strike have not yet been reported.

On 22 March, President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the Bakhmut area, where he presented medals to soldiers, and also went to Kharkiv, where he handed a Hero City of Ukraine medal to its mayor Ihor Terekhov. Kharkiv is one of ten cities to have received this award during the ongoing Russian aggression. On 23 March, Zelensky visited Kherson oblast, where he

reviewed the situation in the areas devastated by last year's fighting, and also decorated outstanding soldiers.

On 22 March, Ukrainian Air Force spokesman Yuri Ihnat denied French media reports that Ukrainian pilots had been training on Mirage aircraft in France. A day later, the French defence ministry confirmed that Ukrainian pilots had been learning to operate surface-to-air anti-aircraft systems and how to follow survival procedures in the event that they end up in enemy-controlled territory. It was reported that 150 French instructors would train up to 600 Ukrainian soldiers per month in Poland.

Spain (on 22 March) and Poland (a day later) joined an agreement reached on 20 March by 17 EU countries and Norway to provide Ukraine with 1 million artillery shells within a year. On 23 March, the Swedish parliament approved a €554 million military aid package that had been announced by the government, including eight Archer self-propelled howitzers and ten Leopard 2A5 tanks. On the same day, Slovakia handed over the first four of the 13 MiG-29 aircraft it had promised to Ukraine. On 23 March, Finland announced its fourteenth military support package for Ukraine, worth €161 million. It includes another three Leopard 2R heavy mine breaching vehicles and undisclosed quantities of unspecified weapons and ammunition. Helsinki has thereby committed to supply Ukraine with all of its six Leopard 2Rs.

The state-owned arms company Ukroboronprom announced that the Ukrainian army had received the first batch of 122-mm artillery rounds manufactured on the territory of one of the NATO countries with the involvement of Ukrainian personnel. This ammunition can be fired by D-30 towed howitzers and 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers, which are among the most common types of guns used by the Ukrainian artillery. This is already the third kind of artillery ammunition that has been manufactured with Ukroboronprom's participation abroad, following 120-mm mortar rounds and 125-mm tank shells. According to NATO's secretary general, Ukrainian forces are currently using between 4000 and 7000 artillery shells per day, while the Russians are firing around 20,000.

In a statement to the European Council on 23 March, President Zelensky highlighted five key threats that he believes are prolonging the war. These include delays in handing over long-range weapons, the failure to deliver modern fighter jets, the risk that further sanctions against Russia will be delayed and that the existing ones will be weakened, the delays in organising an international summit to work out a peace formula, and the slow progress regarding Ukraine's integration into the EU.

The deputy head of Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) Vadym Skibitsky said that the Russian arms complex could be manufacturing around 20-30 Kalibr and Kh-101 cruise missiles per month by the end of the year. He added that airstrikes would target military facilities, areas of troop concentrations and the logistics system, including fuel depots. According to HUR, the enemy's troops do not have the capacity to mount a major offensive in several directions simultaneously.

According to British military intelligence, as of mid-March Russia has redeployed at least 1000 troops to the Ukrainian front since completing their training at the Belarusian Obuz-Lesnovsky training ground. The fact that Russia decided to have its personnel trained by the much less experienced Belarusian army shows that the course of the 'special military

operation' has caused serious disruptions in the system of preparing soldiers for combat. Most of the experienced Russian instructors are being sent to the forces already fighting in Ukraine.

The Security Service of Ukraine has detained 34 people involved in smuggling men who wanted to evade mobilisation. The cost of smuggling across the border ranged from $2000 to more than $13,000, depending on the place of residence and the date of departure. The scheme involved fake documents declaring the men unfit for military service. The offenders face sentences of three to five years' imprisonment.

On 23 March, a collaborating deputy chief of the district police station in the occupied city of Melitopol was seriously injured when a remotely controlled explosive device was set off. This was the third attack targeting Russian collaborators this month.

Commentary

- Even though the situation around Bakhmut and Avdiivka looks unfavourable for the Ukrainian side, there is no indication that the defenders will be surrounded in the immediate future. The Ukrainian command appears to have the situation under control: it has managed to prevent the units involved in combat from being cut off from the rear. The Ukrainian troops are probably slowly withdrawing from successive quarters of Bakhmut under pressure from the Wagner Group's assault units. However, the Russian mercenaries are suffering heavy losses in the process, and they are apparently concentrating their efforts on the city itself while systematically handing over more sections of the front around Bakhmut to regular army units (for example, the 106th Airborne Division is reportedly active in the Ivanivsky area).
- There is a notable presence of a strong Russian grouping on the section of the front that leads from the border between the two countries north of Kupiansk to the Donets river near Kreminna. The units of the 1st Tank Army, the 20th Army, the 41st Army and a grouping of airborne troops, which have held the initiative on the battlefield for a long time, are concentrated in that area. Despite the involvement of such a large force, which has relatively modern equipment and strong artillery support, the attackers have made little progress in this direction. They have undoubtedly succeeded in keeping the Ukrainian forces a few kilometres away from the Svatove-Kreminna road, but have failed in their repeated attempts over the past few weeks to reach the Oskil river in the Lyman area.