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Ukrainian counter-offensive in the south of the country. Day 470 of the war

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On 7 June, Ukrainian units struck in the Zaporizhzhia oblast, attempting to break through Russian defences in two or three places (depending on the attack wave) south of Orikhiv; the heaviest fighting is taking place over the town of Robotyne. Attempts to break through the invaders' defences are also being undertaken about 25 km west of Orikhiv, in the area of the towns of Lobkove and Zherebianka. So far the attacks have ended at the limits of the Russians' first line of defence, but the Ukrainians are expected to bring further forces into the fight. The fighting which began on 4 June in the area of Velyka Novosilka is also expected to continue; at that location, Ukrainian forces have renewed their attempts to advance on Novodonetske, which lies to the south-east of the village (the Ukrainians temporarily occupied the village on 5 June, but have since been driven out of it). Kyiv has still not officially commented on the launch of the counter-offensive. On 7 June Oleksiy Danilov, the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, stated in an interview with Reuters that it had not yet started, and that the Russians were said to have mistaken the "relocation of Ukrainian troops in several places" to be the formal start of the operation. On 8 June, however, the deputy defence minister Hanna Malar confirmed that fighting was underway in the area of Velyka Novosilka, stating that "the enemy are actively defending themselves" in the area of Orikhiv. The following day she described the ongoing operations as positional fighting. According to the available information, the Ukrainian army has so far committed forces of at least six brigades, including subunits from at least three out of the nine brigades trained and equipped in the West which had hitherto remained in reserve.

Ukrainian forces also renewed their attempts to attack on the flanks of Bakhmut (the south-western flank in the area of Klishchiivka and the north-western flank in the area of Berkhivka), but with little success. At the same time, the Ukrainian General Staff reports increasing activity from the Russians, who are expected to launch flanking attacks against the Ukrainian groups west of Bakhmut, along the M03 highway to Slovyansk (in the area of Orikhovo-Vasylivka) and on the western side of the Donets-Donbas canal (Bila Hora and Stupochky). The Russians are also expected to attack Ivanivske, which is currently in the centre of the Ukrainian grouping in this area. There is still heavy fighting around Marinka, but the number of hostile attacks has dropped below 10 per day. After a break of several days, the invading forces also resumed their attacks on Avdiivka and localities west of it (including Pervomaiske). Russian assaults south of Siversk (Vesele) and west of Horlivka (Pivnichne) appear to have failed. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the total number

of clashes remained in the range of 30–40 per day, but this does not take the actions on the southern section of the front into account.

On 8 and 9 June, the Russians launched further missile attacks on infrastructure deep inside Ukrainian territory. Large-scale destruction was confirmed in Uman in (Cherkasy oblast), near Zviahel (Zhytomyr oblast) and in the Novomoskovsk region of Dnipropetrovsk oblast. The invaders have in effect been carrying out attacks on the Ukrainian hinterland in Kharkiv oblast on a daily basis. Hostile missile strikes were reported in Malynivka in the Chuhuyev region, as well as on the outskirts of Kharkiv city; on 9 June the Bogodukhiv region was the target of a massive kamikaze drone attack. On 7 June, four Russian missiles hit Avdiivka town. The Ukrainian Air Force Command only provided summary reports concerning the attacks on the night of 9 June, stating that four out of six enemy Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles and 10 out of 16 Shahed-136/131 and Lancet kamikaze drones were shot down.

The flooding of the areas from which Russian artillery had been shelling the western (right-bank) part of the Kherson oblast and the coastal areas of the Mykolaiv oblast prior to the blowing up of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant dam has briefly reduced its activity. On 7 June, two enemy shells fell on Kherson, but the very next day the shelling once again became more frequent, and the population evacuated from the submerged areas came under fire (there were reports of two dead and 17 wounded). However the Russians did not reduce their shelling of Nikopol, and their artillery and aviation also continuously attacked the combat zones and border areas. Ukrainian artillery mainly targeted the Russian hinterland in the south: Berdyansk, Myrne on the outskirts of Melitopol, and Tokmak. More Ukrainian cruise missiles also struck Luhansk, and local Russian sources reported drone activity in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts.

According to information from the Ukrainian Operational Command South, Russian forces were forced to withdraw to a depth of 5 to 15 km from the River Dnieper as a result of the flooding caused by the blowing up of the dam. The fortifications of the Russians' first line of defence were destroyed (notably in Hola Prystan and Oleshki, from which Kherson and neighbouring towns had been shelled), along with the minefields they had laid. However, the flood did not affect the situation of the Ukrainian troops stationed on the Dnieper's right bank. Damage to the defenders' positions in Command South was assessed as minimal. The Ukrainian General Staff further reported that the flood cost the aggressors dearly in terms of personnel and equipment. Several field depots with ammunition, food and various types of vehicles (including armoured vehicles) which the Russians failed to evacuate were said to be under water. According to the military administration of Odesa, on the other hand, mines and ammunition carried downstream on the Dnieper have already begun to pose a threat to the Odesa oblast. In contrast, the authorities in the Mykolaiv oblast reported that the makeshift bridges in the region of Snihuriv had been destroyed by the water (the Russians blew them up just before the evacuation in November 2022).

On 6 June, the Czech Ministry of Defence announced an agreement between the Ukrainian state company Ukroboronprom and the Czech armaments company VOP CZ on the joint overhaul of T-64 tanks at the plant in Novy Jičín. The contract provides for the overhaul (combined with full disassembly and replacement of components) of unusable machines that have spent several decades in Ukrainian warehouses. The overhaul is expected to last until the end of 2023; the number of tanks to be renovated was not disclosed.

On 7 June, the German government announced another arms package for Ukraine, which includes eight Bandvagn 206 articulated tracked transporters (BV206s; in total, Germany plans to supply the Ukrainian army with 64 of these vehicles), 2000 rounds of 35-mm ammunition for Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns and 14 Vector reconnaissance drones. On the same day, Rheinmetall announced that the German defence ministry had ordered that 20 Marder infantry fighting vehicles be prepared and dispatched to Ukraine by the end of July; the Ukrainian army has so far received 40 such IFVs. Thie German government had announced this latest delivery back in May. Rheinmetall is also expected to deliver the first batch of 10,000 newly produced 35-mm cartridges for the Gepards (out of a contract for 300,000) to Ukraine by the end of July. On 8 June, the Swedish defence ministry confirmed that the CV90 infantry fighting vehicle crews training there had completed their work and had returned to Ukraine. The Ukrainian army has so far received at least half of the 50 CV90s it had been promised.

On 9 June, Bloomberg reported that the Pentagon intends to announce another military support package for Kyiv worth more than $2 billion. These will be used to purchase Hawk air defence launchers and the missiles for them, as well as GEM-T and PAC-3 missiles for Patriot systems. The funds are to be disbursed from the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), which means the procurement and delivery will take place over a longer period, of at least several months.

A sabotage operation to destabilise the situation in Belgorod oblast is ongoing. A detachment of the Russian Volunteer Corps has declared that it retains control over the border town of Novaya Tavolzhanka, located on the Russian side of the border. On 7 June, Ukrainian military intelligence spokesman Andriy Yusov stated that the Russian volunteers are play a role of armed self-defence on Russian territory, “where they are protecting their compatriots from the criminal Kremlin regime”. He added that the voluntary evacuation of civilians from the Belgorod oblast to Ukraine was being considered.

On 8 June, the General Staff of Ukraine reported that Russian forces were relocating people evacuated from the occupied part of Kherson oblast to facilities at the rear of the frontline which are manned by Russian troops. This ‘living shield’ is intended to prevent Ukrainian troops from launching attacks on the Russian units located at the rear.

On 9 June, during a meeting with Alyaksandr Lukashenko in Sochi, Vladimir Putin announced that the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus would begin immediately after their storage facilities had been completed, which is expected to take place on 7–8 July. On 7 June Andriy Demchenko, the head of the Ukrainian border service, reported that there was still no sign that an offensive grouping capable of attacking Ukraine was being created on Belarusian territory. The Russian forces located there are continuing their training; according to Ukrainian data, they currently number no more than 1000.

On 7 June Ihor Kuzin, the head of Ukraine’s sanitary-epidemiological service, noted that, as every year, inspections in Odesa, Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts to reveal cases of infectious diseases had been stepped up. He added that there is a high risk of cholera outbreaks following the subsidence of the water that flooded the surrounding areas following the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam, but he maintained that laboratory services are ready to diagnose the disease.

On 8 June, Ukraine's Accounts Chamber reported that defence and security spending in the first quarter of this year amounted to almost 389 billion hryvnias (c. $10.6 billion), accounting for 61% of state budget expenditure.

Commentary

- The Ukrainian strikes confirm that the aim of the offensive launched in recent days is to cut off Russia's land connection to occupied Crimea. The Ukrainian army has not opted for a massive attack, choosing to increase its engagement at a gradual pace (two brigades took part in the first attacks in the Velyka Novosilka area). Nor has it so far committed the strike grouping (nine brigades trained in the West and equipped with heavy weaponry donated by partners) on a larger scale; this unit still constitutes a strategic reserve. Nevertheless subunits of this grouping, which have Leopard 2 tanks among others, are being systematically brought into the fight. It remains to be seen over the next week whether the Ukrainian units will be able to break through the first line of Russian defences (which is organised in three lines in the direction of Mariupol and Melitopol) and develop their success into further operations heading for the Sea of Azov. It should be assumed that the Ukrainians will continue to operate wherever they can achieve a breakthrough (whether it be Orikhiv or Velyka Novosilka), and only then will they bring the core of the strike grouping into the fight.
- The flooding of the area following the blowing up of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant dam is becoming a serious military problem for the Russians. As a result of the flooding, a no-man's zone 5 to 15 km wide has appeared on the left bank of the Dnieper; it may prove impossible for the Russian army to reintegrate it into the area they now control during the coming months. The reconstruction of the fortifications will be hampered not only by shelling from Ukrainian forces (previously, the Russians had built the first defence lines on the left bank of the Dnieper when they controlled the right bank part of the Kherson oblast), but above all by the destruction of the minefields. In engineering terms, the post-flood terrain will pose an unknown to the invaders, and will constitute a danger analogous to that of the Ukrainian forces against whom the mine barrage system was built. On the other hand, once the flood has receded, Ukrainian forces will gain relative freedom to penetrate the left bank of the Dnieper and establish bridgeheads on it, which they did not have before the dam was blown up. Due to the above-mentioned mine threat (the effects of the flooding will subside within around ten days), a Ukrainian strike on the left bank of the Kherson oblast as part of the counter-offensive launched in recent days is highly unlikely.