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The Ukrainians have established a bridgehead on the Dnieper's left bank. Day 488 of the war

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Ukrainian forces are continuing their offensive operations in Zaporizhzhia oblast and the western part of Donetsk oblast. On 24 June, south of Orikhiv, they again pushed the Russians away from the Zaporizhzhia-Mariupol road and approached the first Russian fortifications in the village of Robotyne. The following day, they intensified their assault south-west of Velyka Novosilka, attacking towards Pryyutne and Rivnopil in Donetsk oblast. On 26 June, deputy defence minister Hanna Maliar confirmed that the latter village had been recapture. The local Ukrainian command reported that the defenders had succeeded in moving one and a half kilometres deep into the Russian grouping in the area, and that they had repulsed the invaders' counter-attack towards Novodarivka in Zaporizhzhia oblast (west of the Ukrainian-occupied Rivnopil), which was seized during the first week of the offensive. However, further attempts at a Ukrainian offensive in the area of the village of Pyatykhatky, 25 km west of Orikhiv, were unsuccessful. According to Maliar, a total of 148 clashes took place along the southern section of the front during the week (until the morning of 26 June), and the Ukrainian army managed to occupy 17 km^2 of terrain. In total, during the three weeks of the offensive, the Ukrainians regained 130 km^2 of territory.

The Russians renewed their attacks on Ukrainian positions on the north-eastern outskirts of Kupiansk (near Synkivka) and south-east of that town, on the border between Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts (in the Kryvoshivka and Stelmakhivka areas). To the north-west of Kreminna, they gained some success, straightening out the front line towards the Zherebets river. However, there was no major change in the subsequent fighting in the forest belt between Kreminna and the River Donets. On 26 June, the commander of the Ukrainian Land Forces, General Oleksandr Syrskyi, stated that the defenders had completely removed the enemy from areas along the western bank of the Donets-Donbas canal, south-west of Bakhmut. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces had again attacked the canal north-west of the city (along the Minkivka-Hryhorivka-Bohdanivka line). However, the actions in the Bakhmut area did not result in any significant changes; nor did the latest clashes to the south-east of Siversk (around Berestove and Vesele) and in the area of Avdiivka and Marinka. According to Maliar, during the week to 26 June the defenders had managed to move a further one to two kilometres in the Bakhmut area. A total of nearly 250 clashes took place along the eastern section of the front during this period.

The Ukrainians managed to establish a bridgehead on the left bank of the Dnieper at the mouth of the Antonivsky Bridge. Attempts by the Russian forces to drive the defenders out were unsuccessful: in the exposed post-flood area, the invaders' subunits were held back by

Ukrainian artillery fire from the upper right bank of the Dnieper. On 26 June, the Russians were planning to try and destroy the bridgehead with massive shelling, including thermobaric rockets. For the first time in many months, clashes also broke out in Sumy oblast. Ukrainian forces there smashed an enemy sabotage and reconnaissance group attacking from Russian territory.

On 24 June, the Russians launched another massive missile attack, with Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kyiv, Kropyvnytskyi and Kryvyi Rih as targets. According to aggregate data from the Ukrainian General Staff, the attackers used a total of 53 missiles (40 Kh-101/Kh-555s, 9 Kh-22s, 2 Kalibrs and 2 S-300s), 41 of which the defenders shot down. The Ukrainians also neutralised three Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones. The largest group (more than 20 missiles) attacked Kyiv and were destroyed in the city's vicinity; despite this, three people were killed and eight wounded. Two days after the attack, Air Force Command spokesman Colonel Yuri Ihnat reported that the main targets of the Russian attacks were military airfields which also serve as depots for arms received from the West, and that they had been under attack for a fortnight. On 25 June, six Russian S-300 missiles fell on the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia. A day later, Russia launched artillery attacks against Odesa (of the three Kalibr missiles and eight Shahed-136/131 drones used, the defenders claimed to have shot down two and seven respectively) and Druzhkivka (the Russians used three or four S-300 and/or Iskander-M missiles; sources vary), and on 27 June two Russian missiles hit Avdiivka. Outside of the combat and border zones, the main targets for Russian artillery and aviation remain Kherson (the city was shelled three times on 25 June), Nikopol and Ochakiv. On 23 June, the Russians erected a pontoon bridge next to the Chonhar bridge, which had been damaged 24 hours earlier in a Ukrainian rocket attack.

On 26 June, Reuters reported that the US plans to announce its 41st military support package for Ukraine; this one will be worth $500 million. It will include 30 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, 25 Stryker armoured personnel carriers, ammunition for HIMARS launchers, Javelin portable anti-tank and Stinger anti-aircraft kits. On the same day, Reuters also reported a new $73.5 million (A$110 million) support package from Australia, including 28 M113 transporters, 14 specialist vehicles, 28 trucks and 14 trailers. Also on 26 June, a new military aid package was approved by the Bulgarian government. The only information was that the support would not compromise the standards of the Bulgarian Armed Forces or their combat training. Two days earlier, on 24 June, General Christian Freuding, the head of the planning staff at the German Ministry of Defence and of the group dealing with the situation in Ukraine, announced that by the end of 2023 Berlin will hand over another 45 Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns to Kyiv: 15 over the coming weeks and 30 at a later point in cooperation with the United States. These were *de facto* purchased by the US in Jordan, and will be overhauled in Germany before being delivered to Ukraine.

The authorities in Kyiv have used Prigozhin's revolt to emphasise Russia's weakness. On 24 June, the foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba stated that those who believed Russia was too strong to lose the war should revise their views. He called for Ukraine to be supplied with the weapons it needs, and for other countries to stop doing business with the aggressor. President Volodymyr Zelensky pointed out that Vladimir Putin has long masked the bad internal situation with propaganda, but the Russian state's weakness was now obvious. He stressed that only Ukraine can protect Europe from the spread of Russian evil and chaos.

On 25 June, referring to rumours of a possible redeployment of some of the Wagner Group's forces to Belarus, the commander of Ukraine's Combined Forces Serhiy Nayev insisted that if there was an attempted incursion into Ukraine, it would be a suicide operation. On 27 June, Ukrainian border service spokesman Andriy Demchenko dismissed reports that construction of Wagner camps had begun in Belarus. He confirmed that up to 2000 Russian soldiers are currently based there and training at the training grounds.

On 25 June, the head of Ukrainian military intelligence Kyrylo Budanov warned that the invaders had approved a plan to cause structural damage to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and that the threat had never been as great as it is now. According to the intelligence service, Russian troops have moved vehicles filled with explosives near to four of the six power units; they could cause a leak of fissile material, in order to force a halt to the Ukrainian offensive and create conditions to freeze the frontline. In turn, US Security Council spokesman John Kirby reported on 27 June that despite Ukrainian reports, the US does not consider the threat of damage to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to be 'imminent', and sees no sign that Russia is preparing to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

Commentary

- The so-called 'march of justice' organised by Yevgeny Prigozhin and its repercussions to date have not affected the military situation. Ukraine did not undertake a decisive strike with its remaining reserves, although whether it was logistically and technically prepared to do so remains an open question. The actions carried out in the second half of 24 June and the following days confirmed that Prigozhin's rebellion had not diminished the Russians' readiness to fight. The progress made by the Ukrainian offensive is still only covering the areas in the overlap zone in front of the invaders' first line of defence, and is considerably less than that achieved during the first two weeks of the offensive.
- The creation and maintenance of a bridgehead on the Russian-controlled bank of the Dnieper should be considered a success for Ukraine. The defenders skilfully exploited the situation created by the flood after the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station's dam, after the destruction of the first line of Russian fortifications and the minefields laid there. The Ukrainian artillery based on the higher right bank of the River Dnieper has now taken control of areas several kilometres deep into the left bank part of the Kherson oblast, so the operations which the defenders are carrying out there now have a more effective artillery umbrella than those undertaken by the Russians. Meanwhile, the washed-out minefields currently pose a similar threat to both the Russian and Ukrainian forces. However, it is unlikely that the Ukrainians will attempt to expand the bridgehead to an extent where it could be used to develop an offensive in the Kherson oblast in the immediate future. This would require the other areas to which the Ukrainian army has committed most of its forces, including reserves, to be weakened.
- Rumours that some of the Wagner forces have been redeployed to Belarus have still not been confirmed. If Alyaksandr Lukashenka receives them into his country, that would have a negative impact on the state of internal security. Even if just a few hundred people maintaining loyalty to Prigozhin arrive there, that would call the ability of the Belarusian forces to control them into question. The potential use of such a force against Ukraine could draw the Belarusian army as a whole into an active phase of combat operations. This would open up the possibility of Belarus becoming a transport hub for Wagner

troops to be flown on to Middle Eastern countries, for example. The spread of reports about the presence of Prigozhin's mercenaries in Belarus is serving to raise tensions in neighbouring countries. This is especially true of the rumours that the Wagner troops could be used for border provocations along Belarus's northern and western borders.

