

Ukraine will get Dutch and Danish F-16s. Day 544 of the war

Jakub Ber, Jacek Tarociński

Speaking in the Netherlands on 20 August, Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte announced that the Hague would be handing over F-16 multi-role aircraft to Kyiv. The Ukrainian leader wrote on social media that up to 42 aircraft would be delivered, but this figure has not been confirmed by any official Dutch announcement. Although Rutte said that the Netherlands has a total of 42 F-16s at its disposal, he did not disclose how many would eventually be delivered to Ukraine. On the same day Zelensky visited Denmark, where it was announced that Copenhagen would be sending Kyiv 19 F-16 fighters. Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen stated that the first six would be shipped around the New Year, with a further eight to be delivered in 2024 and the final five in 2025. The Netherlands and Denmark also issued a joint statement stipulating that their donation of F-16s to Ukraine would only take place once the Ukrainian pilots and ground support personnel had completed their training. The commander of the Royal Danish Air Force reported that a group of 73 Ukrainians (including six pilots) had arrived at Skrydstrup air force base in southern Jutland to undergo a six-month course in F-16 operations, after which the training of another equally large group would begin.

There was no fundamental change in the combatants' positions between 16 and 22 August. The most important combat zone is the section of the Zaporizhzhia front in the area of Robotyne, Novoprokopivka and Verbove. Clashes are ongoing to take control of a line of hills that reaches its highest point precisely between these three villages: this is where the Russian defensive lines are located. Although the troops' exact location is unknown, footage from 21 August indicates that Ukrainian assault troops have captured most of Robotyne village; a day later Kyiv officially announced their entry into the village and the evacuation of the population.

The invaders are continuing their offensive operations near Kupiansk. The assault is focused on the vicinity of the village of Synkivka, which appears not yet to have been fully captured by Russian 6th Army troops. Heavy fighting is also taking place near Bakhmut, where both sides are unsuccessfully attempting to attack the other's positions, including with tanks. In the key section south of the town, the front continues to run along the Mayorsk-Bakhmut railway line.

On the night of 18–19 August, the Russians attacked Ukraine using 17 Shahed 136/131 drones that took off from near Kursk; according to the Ukrainian Air Force Command, 15 of them were shot down. On 19 August at around midday, the invaders fired a cruise missile from the Iskander-K system. It hit the building of the Musical and Dramatic Theatre in Chernihiv; at least seven people were killed and 129 wounded. On the night of 21–22

August, the Russians carried out another air strike against facilities located in Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. The Ukrainian side has not yet published information on the weapons used by the enemy or the losses sustained.

From 18 to 22 August, Ukrainian drones attacked facilities deep inside Russia. On the night of 17–18 August, an unmanned drone damaged an exhibition pavilion that is part of the Ekspotsentr complex located adjacent to the Moscow City business centre. According to Russian reports, most of the drones targeting Moscow were downed by anti-aircraft defences or neutralised by radio-electronic warfare measures. The appearance of the drones led to the suspension of air traffic at Moscow's Vnukovo and Domodedovo airports on several occasions. On 19 and 21 August, the Ukrainians also used drones to attack the military airfields at Soltsy (Novgorod oblast) and Shaykovka (Kaluga oblast), where Tu-22M3 strategic bombers are based. Citing sources in the military intelligence, Ukrainian media reported that two Tu-22M3 bombers had been destroyed and another two damaged. The Russian defence ministry confirmed the attack on the Soltsy airfield, but did not acknowledge the loss of the aircraft.

On 17 August, the Chancellery Office reported that Germany had supplied Kyiv with two IRIS-T SLS short-range anti-aircraft missile launchers, 4539 155-mm artillery smoke shells, 10 GO12 battlefield surveillance radars, four HX81 trucks with four trailers, and eight trucks of an unspecified type, among other items. On the same day, the US gave formal approval for Denmark and the Netherlands to transfer the above-mentioned F-16 multi-role aircraft to Ukraine.

On 18 August, the British Ministry of Defence announced that it had signed a \$115 million contract with Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace to manufacture and supply Kyiv with unmanned aerial vehicles and Cortex Typhon C-UAS countermeasures systems; the number of systems ordered was not specified. The purchase is being funded by the International Fund for Ukraine (IFU), which is chaired by the UK.

The next day, President Zelensky visited Sweden. During a joint conference with Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, a declaration was signed regarding cooperation in the production, operation and maintenance of CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, all of which will be carried out on Ukrainian territory in the future. In addition, it was announced that a small group of Ukrainian pilots had started test flights on JAS-39 Gripen fighters, although the possibility of these aircraft being handed over to Kyiv has been ruled out for the time being.

On 17 August, Zelensky signed a law extending martial law on Ukrainian territory for another 90 days, that is, until 15 November. The document allows restrictions on the freedom of movement of people and the organisation of assemblies and mass events, the seizure of civilian property for defence purposes, the banning of certain political parties and associations, and also prevents amendments to the constitution and the holding of elections. Martial law has already been extended eight times since the beginning of the full-scale war with Russia.

Commentary

- The announcements that Western-made multi-role fighters are being sent to Ukraine represents a departure from yet another restriction which the West had previously

imposed on itself. However, neither the number of aircraft nor the schedule for their delivery will have a rapid or a large impact on the battlefield. Kyiv defines its needs regarding the numbers of multirole aircraft it requires as 10 squadrons (120 aircraft in total). According to the timetable presented by Denmark, which is likely to be closely correlated with deliveries from the Netherlands, Ukraine will receive just one squadron in Q1 2024 and another by the end of 2024. If it does not suffer significant losses of F-16s during this period, it will have three squadrons of these aircraft in 2025 (otherwise, any more aircraft it receives will be diverted to existing squadrons as replacements for losses rather than being used to create a new squadron), which is far from the number it will really need.

- The challenge for Kyiv will be to keep the F-16 fighter jets operational, especially as the Dutch and Danish machines are old and well-used, and are in varying states of repair. Also, developing the ground maintenance staff they need will be a lengthy process: the basic training for a technician takes about six months, but after that it will take up to two years of constant work on a given machine for such a soldier to be able to work independently (i.e. not requiring constant supervision), and it will take another five years or so to gain experience to become instructors. Therefore, either soldiers from Western countries with technical specialities who volunteer for the Foreign Legion or private contractors from Lockheed Martin will be needed to maintain the donated F-16s.
- The Netherlands currently has 24 F-16 AMs (single-seaters) in active service. These are due to be completely replaced by F-35As by the end of 2024, two of which have already been sold to the private company Draken International and are due to be handed over to it in the near future. In addition, 18 of the Dutch F-16s are in storage, six of which serve as sources of spare parts (they are being disassembled in order to obtain them). Meanwhile Denmark has 30 F-16 AM/BM aircraft (two-seaters used for training), which are due to be decommissioned by the end of 2025. Neither country can hand over all its aircraft to Ukraine until they receive their successors (F-35A multirole combat aircraft). Thus, it will not be possible for the Netherlands alone to send Kyiv as many as 42 fighters. Most likely, therefore, by the end of 2025 Kyiv will receive a total of up to 42 F-16 AMs from Denmark and the Netherlands. All of these planes represent older versions of the Block 20 MLU (Mid-Life Upgrade), this means that their radar systems are not the most modern available, and that they are unable to use some of the latest available versions of weaponry.
- The scene of the heaviest fighting along the Zaporizhzhia front is the northern part of the Azov Upland between the Konka and Tokmachka rivers. This area is characterised by numerous valleys and ravines, which greatly restrict the movement of troops. Because of the course of the front line prior to 4 June 2023 and the terrain, the Ukrainians were able to launch an offensive towards Tokmak along a narrow stretch of about 20 km. Each variant of the operation involved an attack from a base of departure situated in one of the valleys, which were under the observation and fire control of the Russian positions located on the neighbouring hills. In addition, the terrain corridors running through the valleys which allowed the assault troops to advance have been tightly mined by the Russians. This layout gave them many advantages and was the most important factor in the Ukrainians' slow movement during the first two months of the offensive. It must be

stressed that the Russians have chosen their positions skilfully and prepared the defence well in engineering terms.

- The ongoing clashes in the vicinity of the villages of Robotyne, Novoprokopivka and Verbove will be crucial for the further course of the campaign in southern Ukraine. These battles are being fought for control of a line of hills rising 140–160 metres above sea level which overlook the whole area. The terrain to the south of them descends: Tokmak, some 20 km away from Robotyne, lies at 40–50 metres above sea level. If this line of hills is captured, opportunities will open up for the Ukrainians to build on their success and launch an attack with larger forces across a wider section of the front.

