

Fighting in Kyiv as Ukraine Says 198 Civilians Killed

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EPA / TASS

Ukrainian forces repulsed a Russian attack on Kyiv but "sabotage groups" infiltrated the capital, officials said Saturday, as Ukraine reported 198 civilians deaths, including children, following Russia's invasion.

A defiant Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed his pro-Western country would never give in to the Kremlin even as Russia said it had fired cruise missiles at military targets.

With explosions echoing around Kyiv on the third day of Russia's assault, Zelensky spoke in a video message, wearing olive green military-style clothing and looking tired but determined.

"I am here. We will not lay down any weapons. We will defend our state, because our weapons are our truth," he said.

"Our truth is that this is our land, our country, our children and we will protect all of this."

Ignoring warnings from the West, Russian President Vladimir Putin unleashed a full-scale invasion that the UN refugee agency said has forced almost 116,000 people to flee to neighboring countries.

Tens of thousands more are estimated to be displaced within Ukraine, with many on the move to less affected western areas of the country.

In Kyiv, residents took shelter in the subway system and in cellars and basements.

"We thought something like this might happen but we were hoping until the end that it wouldn't," Irina Butyak told AFP in one shelter.

"We were hoping that common sense and common decency would prevail. Well, it didn't," said the 38-year-old teacher, who hoped she would be able to escape soon to western Ukraine.

Ukrainian Health Minister Viktor Lyashko said 198 civilians, including three children, had been killed in the conflict and 1,115 wounded.

In Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that the world must brace for a long war.

"This crisis will last, this war will last and all the crises that come with it will have lasting consequences," Macron said.

"We must be prepared."

After speaking to Macron, Zelensky tweeted to thank "partners" for sending weapons and equipment.

Several NATO members have sent weapons and ammunition to Ukraine in recent weeks, including Britain, the United States and ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe.

In another video address, the 44-year-old leader also said that his country had "derailed" the Russian plan of overthrowing him and establishing a puppet state in Ukraine.

Air raid sirens and birdsong

In the early hours of Saturday, AFP reporters in Kyiv heard occasional blasts of what soldiers said were artillery and Grad missiles being fired in an area northwest of the city center.

There were also loud explosions in the center.

Emergency services said a high-rise apartment block was hit by shelling overnight, posting a picture that showed a hole covering at least five floors blasted into the side of the building.

Kyiv's mayor, Vitali Klitschko, said the building had been hit by a missile.

"The night was difficult, but there are no Russian troops in the capital," he said.

"The enemy is trying to break into the city, in particular from Gostomel, Zhytomyr, where the aggressors are neutralized," he said, referring to two settlements to the northwest and west

of the city.

"Now in Kyiv there are, unfortunately, sabotage groups, there were several clashes," he said.

Hours later, AFP saw a destroyed Ukrainian military truck in the city center and a civilian volunteer digging a trench for soldiers.

Ukrainian army tanks were also seen maneuvering all over the center but the streets were mostly empty and the center silent except for the sound of air raid sirens and birdsong.

The city said it was toughening a curfew in place and anyone on the streets after 5:00 p.m. would be considered "members of the enemy's sabotage and reconnaissance groups."

Russian plan 'derailed'

Zelensky on Saturday said that Ukraine had "derailed" Russia's attack plan and urged Russians to pressure Putin into ending the war.

When he announced the assault in a pre-dawn television statement on Thursday, Putin called it a "special military operation" aimed at defending Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The separatists have been fighting Ukrainian government forces in the east for eight years in a conflict in which more than 14,000 people have been killed.

Russia's communications regulator on Saturday told independent media to remove reports describing it as an "assault, invasion, or declaration of war."

In a statement, the regulator accused the media outlets of spreading "untrue information" about the shelling of Ukrainian cities by the Russian army and civilian deaths.

'Point of no return'

But Russia has brushed off international condemnation and increasingly stringent sanctions adopted by the United States, Canada, Britain and the European Union, including against Putin himself and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Russia said sanctioning the pair was "a demonstration of the complete impotence of the foreign policy" of the West.

"We have reached the line after which the point of no return begins," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

The impact of sanctions has been far-reaching.

French naval forces on Saturday said they had intercepted in the Channel a cargo vessel loaded with cars bound for Russia.

The Russian-flagged Baltic Leader ship is suspected of belonging to a sanctioned company.

Zelensky has called on Western allies to expel Moscow from the SWIFT banking transfer system.

But a number of EU countries, including Germany, Hungary and Italy, have been reluctant over fears Russia could cut off gas supplies.

While sanctions have focused on Russia-linked finances, travel and trade, there have also been repercussions in the worlds of culture and sports.

In the latest development, Poland on Saturday said it was refusing to play its 2022 World Cup play-off against Russia on March 24.

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