

Ukraine Denounces New 'Wall' in Europe as Theatre Hit

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March 17, 2022



In an address to the U.S. Congress, Zelenskyy showed lawmakers a video of the wrenching effect of three weeks of Russian attacks. **EPA / DREW ANGERER / POOL / TASS**

Ukraine's leader on Thursday said Russia was building a new Cold War wall across Europe "between freedom and bondage," after his government accused invading forces of bombing a theatre sheltering many civilians and marked with the word "children."

Kyiv emerged from a 35-hour curfew to new destruction, as Russian troops try to encircle the Ukrainian capital as part of their slow-moving offensive.

A distraught man crouched over a body draped in a bloodstained cloth beneath a Kyiv apartment block damaged by a downed rocket, AFP journalists saw, in the latest in a series of early morning attacks.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the German parliament a day after a speech to the

U.S. Congress, when he secured \$1 billion in new U.S. military aid, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles used against Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

Zelenskiy reached back to the Cold War era as he drew on a 1987 speech in Berlin by U.S. president Ronald Reagan: "Dear Mr Scholz, tear down this Wall," he implored German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

"It's not a Berlin Wall — it is a Wall in central Europe between freedom and bondage and this Wall is growing bigger with every bomb."

In an overnight video message, Zelenskiy also urged Russians to lay down their arms, three weeks into an invasion that has seen the West impose swingeing sanctions against President Vladimir Putin's regime.

"If your war, the war against the Ukrainian people, continues, Russia's mothers will lose more children than in the Afghan and Chechen wars combined," he said, referencing the thousands lost in those conflict.

Putin lashes 'traitors'

U.S. President Joe Biden called Putin a "war criminal," triggering fury in the Kremlin, as the Russian leader also lashed out at "traitors" at home who he said were undermining the war effort.

Russia's Defense Ministry denied it had targeted the Drama Theatre in the besieged port city of Mariupol, where local officials say more than 2,000 people have died so far in indiscriminate Chechnya-style shelling.

The ministry said the building had been mined and blown up by members of Ukraine's far-right Azov Battalion, a claim dismissed in the West as Russian disinformation.

Zelensky said the "number of dead is not yet known" but said the attack showed that "Russia has become a terrorist state."

Ukrainian officials said more than 1,000 civilians had been taking shelter in the theatre. Human Rights Watch said it was at least 500.

Satellite images of the theatre on March 14 shared by private satellite company Maxar showed the words "children" clearly etched out in the ground in Russian on either side of the building.

Officials posted a photo of the building, whose middle part was completely destroyed, with thick white smoke rising from the rubble after they said a bomb was dropped from an airplane.

"The only word to describe what has happened today is genocide, genocide of our nation, our Ukrainian people," Mariupol mayor Vadim Boychenko said.

'War crimes'

In his video address to the US Congress, Zelensky had invoked Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 attacks and Martin Luther King Jr as he showed lawmakers a video of the devastating effect of Russian attacks.

He wore the same military green T-shirt in addressing the Bundestag, and issued a strong rebuke of Germany's years-long reluctance to sever its energy and business ties with Russia.

"We turned to you," he said. "We told you that Nord Stream (gas pipelines) was a kind of preparation for the war.

"And the answer we got was purely economic — it is economy, economy, economy but that was the mortar for the new Wall."

But NATO members have resisted Zelenskiy's pleas for direct involvement through a no-fly zone over Ukraine, warning it could lead to World War III against nuclear-armed Russia.

They have stepped up military aid instead, with Biden announcing the United States would also help Ukraine acquire longer-range anti-aircraft weapons.

Britain's diplomatic mission to the UN tweeted that Russia was committing "war crimes and targeting civilians" in Ukraine, after the UK requested an emergency UN Security Council meeting.

"Russia's illegal war on Ukraine is a threat to us all," it said, saying the request was made with the US, France, Albania, Norway and Ireland.

But Putin, at a televised government meeting Wednesday, insisted the invasion was "developing successfully," adding "we will not allow Ukraine to serve as a springboard for aggressive actions against Russia."

He also condemned the Western sanctions as "economic blitzkrieg," after Russia was frozen out of much of the Western financial system.

The Kremlin also rejected an order by the top UN court to halt its Ukraine invasion.

However, the Russian Finance Ministry said Thursday it had carried out interest payments worth \$117.2 million on two foreign bonds, avoiding default for now on Russia's foreign debts.

From rockets to rifles

As the civilian toll in Ukraine climbed, the World Health Organization said that healthcare facilities and personnel were being attacked at an unprecedented rate.

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told reporters "this crisis is reaching a point where the health system in Ukraine is teetering on the brink."

The UN health agency has verified 43 attacks on health facilities, ambulances and health personnel in Ukraine since the Russian invasion began on Feb. 24.

More than 3 million Ukrainians have fled across the border, mostly women and children, with 103 children killed in the war, authorities have said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said a "compromise" outcome would center on Ukraine becoming a neutral state comparable to Sweden and Austria.

But Zelenskiy's office gave the idea short shrift — and many Ukrainians themselves remained defiant.

Retired tennis player Sergiy Stakhovsky, who knocked Roger Federer out of Wimbledon in 2013, traded his racquet for a Kalashnikov and returned home to defend Kyiv.

"I knew I had to go there," he told AFP as he patrolled the city in khaki camouflage, toting a rifle.

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