

Ukraine advances against Russian troops in Bakhmut area, but needs “a bit more time” before opening its counteroffensive



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks & troop locations as of today.

This week, for the first time in several months, Ukrainian forces took back some of the territory in and around Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine that had been taken by Russian troops and those of the Wagner Group, the private military company of Yevgeny Prigozhin. On Tuesday evening, Prigozhin said troops from Ukraine’s Third Assault Brigade, supported by T-64 tanks and M-113 armored personnel carriers, had taken territory southwest of Bakhmut and advanced to the Bakhmutovka River that goes through the center of the heavily damaged and largely vacated city. Prigozhin accused Russian infantry troops – specifically, those in the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade – of abandoning their positions, thereby allowing the Ukrainian troops to outflank his forces: “The situation on the flanks is developing according to the worst predicted scenario.” As a result, he said, the Russian forces had lost the territory and his forces had lost 500 men: “Our army is fleeing. The 72nd Brigade [lost] three square km this morning, where I had lost around 500 men.” In a statement that evening, Ukraine’s Third Brigade said, “It’s official. Prigozhin’s report about the flight of Russia’s 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade from near Bakhmut and the ‘500 corpses’ of Russians left behind is true.” On Wednesday morning, a leader of one of the Ukrainian units said, “In fact, the 6th and 7th squadrons of the [Russian] Brigade were almost entirely destroyed, brigade intelligence was destroyed, a large number of fighting vehicles were destroyed, and a considerable number of prisoners were taken. The attacks were implemented within a territory 3 km wide and 2.6 km deep, and this entire territory is completely liberated from the Russian occupying forces.” It was, according to a report in the Kyiv Post, “the most extensive

liberation of Russian-occupied ground, by any Ukrainian unit, anywhere on the fighting front, since late January.”

Following a visit to the battlefield, Col.-Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of Ukraine’s ground forces, said, “We carried out effective counterattacks....The enemy could not withstand the onslaught of Ukrainian defenders and retreated to a distance of up to two kilometers at different points of the front.” Nevertheless, the spokesperson for Ukraine’s eastern military command also made it clear that the battle for Bakhmut is far from over: “The situation in Bakhmut remains difficult because for the enemy...it is still the main direction of attack, the main coveted target.”

The Russian defense ministry rejected the various claims that there had been “breakthroughs” at various points in the vicinity of Bakhmut: “The statements made public by some Telegram channels about ‘breaches of defenses’ taking place in various sections of the line of combat engagement are false...The general situation in the area of Russia’s special military operation [Putin’s name for the war] is under control.” In an update, the ministry said that some Russian troops had been “regrouped” in some areas around Bakhmut “for strategic reasons.” Prigozhin, continuing his strongly-worded criticisms of the ministry, said what the ministry was describing “is unfortunately called ‘fleeing’ and not ‘regrouping’.”

Yesterday, as the battle for Bakhmut continued and observers continued to speculate about when Ukraine’s long-anticipated counteroffensive might begin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made it clear in an interview with the BBC that Ukraine needs a bit more time before launching the counteroffensive: “Mentally, we’re ready. In terms of how motivated our military are, we’re ready. In terms of enough personnel in our brigades, we’re ready. In terms of equipment, not everything has arrived yet. [BBC interviewer: “Are you waiting for weapons and military equipment?"] Yes, we’re still expecting some things. They will reinforce our counteroffensive. And most importantly, they will protect our people. We’re expecting armored vehicles. They arrive in batches. We can advance with what we’ve got. And I think we can be successful. But we will lose a lot of people. I think that is unacceptable. We need to wait. We need a bit more time.”

And so, while Ukraine waits a bit to begin its long-anticipated counteroffensive, the battle for Bakhmut continues.

David R. Cameron
May 12, 2023