

After two weeks of the counteroffensive, some small advances



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

While Ukraine has never formally announced when its long-awaited counteroffensive began, the best guess is it began more than two weeks ago, on Sunday June 4. The Russian defense ministry described a “large-scale offensive” taking place that day at several points along the contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, and Kyiv also acknowledged that “offensive actions” had taken place that day against Russian positions on the northern and southern flanks of the city of Bakhmut, which had recently been taken by Russian forces after a prolonged siege. And someone who no doubt knows very well when the counteroffensive began, Russian President Putin, said in a video interview published on Telegram on June 9, “We can definitely state that this Ukrainian offensive has begun” and that “combat has continued for five days.” On June 10, speaking at a press conference in Kyiv with Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau and taking note of Putin’s comments, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy acknowledged “counteroffensive and defensive actions are taking place in Ukraine.”

In addition to attacking the Russian forces in the northern and southern outskirts of Bakhmut, the Ukrainian forces began the counteroffensive by attacking Russian positions in Zaporizhzhia region near the small city of Orikhiv, which is about 50 miles southeast of the city of Zaporizhzhia, and in the area west of Vuhledar along the boundary between the Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk regions. (See map above.) On June 9, summing up the situation near the end of the first week of the counteroffensive, Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Defense Hanna Maliar, writing on Telegram, said, “The situation is tense in all areas of the front line. The east is the epicenter. The enemy continues to concentrate its main efforts on the Lyman, Bakhmut, Avdiivka and

Maryinka directions. [Maryinka is a small city near Vuhledar.] The enemy is conducting defensive actions in the Zaporizhzhia sector.” She said battles were continuing near Orikhiv and nearby Velyka Novosilka and Russian troops were mounting an “active defense” in the Orikhiv area.

On June 12, Maliar posted another update on Telegram, noting that Ukrainian troops had pushed the front forward six kilometers in the first week of the counteroffensive and, in so doing, had liberated seven small settlements in the Zaporizhzhia region – Lobkove, Levadne, Novodarovka, Neskuchne, Storozhove, Makarivka, and Blahodatne. She also noted that the Ukrainian forces had pushed the front forward in the area immediately to the north and south of Bakhmut by about 1.5 kilometers on the left flank and 3.5 kilometers on the right flank and, in so doing, had taken more than 15 square kilometers of territory. In all, she said, the Ukrainian forces had taken back about 90 square kilometers of territory from the Russian forces.

On June 14, Maliar posted another update on Telegram in which she said the Ukrainian forces in the past day had advanced 200 to 250 meters in the areas just north and south of Bakhmut and had also advanced up to a kilometer in Zaporizhzhia region and had retaken the village of Urozhaine near the border with Donetsk region. But, she said, “Our troops are moving in the face of extremely fierce fighting and air and artillery superiority of the enemy...As of now, we are both on the offensive and defensive.... There is a very serious standoff.”

Last Thursday, Maliar reiterated that the Ukrainian forces were “both on the offensive and on the defensive. In the Bakhmut area, the enemy is currently moving additional reserves and is trying to prevent the advance of the Ukrainian defense forces with all their might. We have recorded an enemy airborne assault unit moving from the south to the Bakhmut direction, and in fact the enemy there continues to concentrate its huge forces – both personnel and military hardware – in order to prevent the advance of our forces.” However, she said, “The enemy cannot advance there and cannot effectively restrain the Ukrainian forces. As a result, in the past one-and-a-half weeks, the advance in the area...amounted to more than 3 kilometers.” Maliar also noted that, despite facing “minefields, kamikaze drones, and intense shelling,” the Ukrainian forces had advanced by up to a kilometer in Donetsk region just west of Vuhledar: “Our troops and units are moving forward in the face of fierce fighting, air, and artillery superiority of the enemy, which is holding on to its positions.”

Last Friday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of Ukraine’s ground forces, said the situation in the east was “tense” and Russia was moving its best divisions into the Bakhmut area, along with artillery and aircraft: “The enemy continues to transfer his military units to Bakhmut, concentrating large forces in this direction. But we have a clear task, which is the de-occupation of our territories. We continue to conduct offensive actions in separate directions, occupying dominant heights and strips of forest with the aim of forcing the enemy gradually out of the outskirts of Bakhmut. Realizing this, the enemy units put up desperate resistance.”

Maliar nevertheless noted last Friday that the primary focus of the counteroffensive had shifted from Bakhmut to the push southward in Zaporizhzhia region which, if successful, would reach Berdiansk and Mariupol and, in so doing, cut the Russian “land bridge” to Crimea: “If the first week the epicentre was the east, now we see that the fighting is moving to the south and now we see the most active areas are [in the direction of] Berdiansk and Mariupol. In the east, the enemy has turned on all the forces to stop our offensive. And they are massing forces there to stop us. In the south they are not very successful. There is progress on all southern directions, and there are several of them.”

On Saturday, Maliar reported on Telegram that “In the south, the Ukrainian troops conduct active offensive operations in several directions at once. Practically in all sectors where our units are attacking in the south, they have registered tactical successes. They are gradually moving forward. At the moment the advance is up to 2 km in each direction. In the areas where we hold the defense, not a single position has been lost and the enemy has not been able to advance.” But she noted that “in the Berdiansk and Mariupol sections, the enemy redeploys troops from other directions and increases firepower. In addition, our troops face continuous minefields.” She also noted the Ukrainian forces were conducting both defensive and counteroffensive actions in eastern Ukraine, where the Russian forces were attempting to dislodge the Ukrainian troops from their positions, particularly in the area east of Lyman, and were deploying additional troops to the Bakhmut and Lyman areas. She noted that, while the overall intensity of hostilities had decreased somewhat in the Bakhmut area, Ukrainian troops were nevertheless carrying out offensive operations in the area with the aim of gradually displacing the Russian forces from the approaches to the city.

On Sunday, Maliar reported that Ukrainian troops were “engaged in active moves” to advance the counteroffensive in Zaporizhzhia region and had recaptured another settlement in the region, Piatykhatky, located on a heavily fortified part of the front line near the most direct route to the Sea of Azov. She noted that “in the course of two weeks of offensive operations in the Berdiansk and Melitopol directions, eight settlements were liberated” and the Ukrainian forces had advanced by up to seven kilometers and had captured 113 square kilometers. “The ongoing operation has several objectives,” she said, “and the military is fulfilling these tasks. They are moving as they should have been moving. And the biggest blow is yet to come.” But she added, “It is necessary to understand that the enemy will not give up positions easily. And we have to realize that it will be a very tough duel. That, in fact, is what is going on right now. And we must not measure the effectiveness only in kilometers or the number of settlements because the ongoing operation has several tasks and the military performs these tasks.” But she noted it’s difficult for the Ukrainian forces to advance because the enemy is “thoroughly preparing and resisting...And our Armed Forces face continuous minefields, the use of kamikaze drones and anti-tank guided missiles...Therefore, it is hot both in the east and in the south right now.”

Yesterday, Maliar reported on Telegram that Ukrainian forces conducted “offensive operations” in Zaporizhzhia region in the direction of Melitopol and Berdiansk. The Ukrainian forces, she said, “had partial success over the past day, they have consolidated at the boundaries that were reached, and they have evened up the front line.” The forces, she said, are continuing their offensive operations toward those two cities. She also reported there was “particularly heavy fighting” in eastern Ukraine, especially near the town of Lyman, where the Ukrainian forces “continued to hold back a large-scale assault by Russian forces in the Lyman and Bakhmut directions.” She said eastern Ukraine remains the main focus of the Russian offensive actions and that Russia still aims to reach the western borders of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The situation there, she said, “is tense but under control. Our defenders do not give the enemy any chance to advance through Donetsk region and Luhansk region.”

Ukraine’s counteroffensive, now in its third week, has resulted in a number of small advances in Zaporizhzhia region and the area along the border between that region and Donetsk region. Yesterday, in an interview with the BBC in connection with the Ukraine Recovery Conference taking place in London, President Zelenskyy acknowledged that progress in the counteroffensive has been “slower than desired.” He said it has not made more progress than it has thus far because the Russians have mined at least 200,000 square kilometers (77,000 square miles) of Ukrainian territory. “Some people,” he said, “believe this is a Hollywood movie and expect results now. It’s not. What’s at stake is people’s lives.... Whatever some might want, with all due respect, we will advance on the battlefield the way we deem best.”

He’s right. It’s not a movie; it’s a war – a war Ukraine must win.

David R. Cameron
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