

## As Russian attacks continue in east, Pope and others call for talks



UK Defence Intelligence update on battlefield situation in Ukraine as of Friday.

Last week, the Russian forces continued their offensive operations against the Ukrainian forces at a number of points along the “contact line” between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. As Friday’s British Defense Intelligence map of the battlefield situation, above, indicates, the Russian forces continue to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, toward the area around Bakhmut, toward the area around Avdiivka, a small city north of Donetsk city from which the Ukrainians withdrew three weeks ago, and toward the area south of Orikhiv in which the Ukrainian forces had previously taken several small towns and villages. But, as in recent weeks, the Russian forces continued to attack at other points as well – most notably, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region, in the area to the west and south of Marinka, a small city about ten miles west of Donetsk city the Russians claimed to have taken in late December – a claim the Ukrainians disputed; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine in which the Ukrainian forces have established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River.

Based on the daily updates on the previous day’s combat engagements issued each morning by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, last week, from Sunday through Saturday, the Russian forces conducted almost 500 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending those points along the contact line – a total of 26 in the direction of Kupiansk, 50 in the direction of Lyman, 42 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 139 toward the area around Avdiivka, 184 toward the area to the west and south of Marinka, 42 toward several villages and small towns held by

Ukrainian forces south of Orikhiv, and 8 toward the Ukrainian forces' beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River east of Kherson city in southern Ukraine. Clearly, judging from the frequency of attacks, the highest priority for the Russian forces in eastern Ukraine last week was extending their control of the territory to the west of Avdiivka and to the west and southwest of Marinka – and, more broadly, to the area to the northwest, west, and southwest of Donetsk city. The Russian forces in that area will presumably continue to attack in those directions while the forces attacking in the direction of Lyman and Bakhmut will presumably continue to attack in those directions as well – the Russian objective being to eventually take the 35 to 40 percent of Donetsk region that's still held by the Ukrainian forces.

Meanwhile, as the Russian ground offensive continues in eastern Ukraine and the rest of Ukraine continues to be attacked by drones and missiles, there have been new calls for a ceasefire, peace talks, and negotiations. On February 23, prior to a meeting of the U.N. Security Council to mark the second anniversary of the start of the war on Feb. 24, 2022, Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis told the U.N. General Assembly, “At Ukraine’s request, we intend to organize by the summer a high-level conference on peace in Ukraine. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to invite all nations...to work together towards our common goal.” On Friday, after talks in Istanbul with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “Since the beginning, we have contributed as much as we could toward ending the war through negotiations. We are also ready to host a peace summit in which Russia will also be included. While we continue our solidarity with Ukraine, we will continue our work to end the war with a just peace on the basis of negotiations. We are not hopeless. We believe that there are some opportunities that Turkey can provide with its stance.” Turkey, it should be noted, briefly hosted talks in the early days of the war that sought, but failed to produce, a ceasefire in the war. Zelenskyy, however, rejected the idea of negotiating directly with Russia and said Kyiv supports the 10-point peace plan he announced in November 2022 that, among other things, calls for the cessation of all hostilities, the withdrawal of all Russian troops, and the full restoration of Ukrainian territorial integrity, including Crimea.

In an interview with Radio Television Suisse (RTS) published on Saturday, the interviewer asked Pope Francis at one point: “In Ukraine, some call for the courage of surrender, of the white flag. But others say that this would legitimize the stronger party. What do you think?” Pope Francis replied, “That is one interpretation. But I believe that the stronger one is the one who sees the situation, who thinks of the people, who has the courage of the white flag, to negotiate. And today, negotiations are possible with the help of international powers. The word ‘negotiate’ is a courageous word. When you see that you are defeated, that things are not going well, it is necessary to have the courage to negotiate. You may feel ashamed, but with how many deaths will it end? Negotiate in time; look for some

country that can mediate. Today, for example in the war in Ukraine, there are many who want to mediate. Turkey has offered itself for this. And others. Do not be ashamed to negotiate before things get worse.”

Today, Ukraine’s foreign ministry summoned the papal nuncio and conveyed Ukraine’s “disappointment” with the Pope’s comment and said he should refrain from making statements that “legalize the right of might and encourage further disregard for the norms of international law.” In a similar vein, Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski said on X, “How about, for balance, encouraging Putin to have the courage to withdraw his army from Ukraine? Peace would immediately ensue without the need for negotiations.”

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