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The Slowdown of the Russian Offensive in Ukraine

Twelve days of the Russian offensive against Ukraine have failed to deliver the Russian Federation a decisive victory. The Ukrainian army is putting up effective resistance to the Russian forces, which are experiencing major losses in personnel and equipment. The Russians have not succeeded in gaining full control over key cities in Eastern and Central Ukraine. A number of Ukrainian cities continue to be targeted by massed rocket and artillery attacks and bombings. The defenders are resisting Russian forces, but are unable to halt the Russian offensive. Attacks carried out on a large scale against civilian targets bear all the hallmarks of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the International Criminal Court at the Hague has already initiated an investigation in this matter. The European Union and NATO declare their assistance for Ukraine, while at the same time sanctions and an escalating boycott of Russia are being increasingly felt by the Russian economy and by ordinary citizens of the Russian Federation.

The military situation. The Russian Federation's 12-day-old war against Ukraine has exposed a range of weaknesses in the Russian army, which is incurring serious losses in its confrontation with Ukrainian forces. However, the spirit of Ukraine's defenders is unable to halt the Russian offensive. The Russians, aiming to break the Ukrainians' resistance, are carrying out mass attacks by missiles, artillery and bombardment of large cities: Kharkiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Bila Tserkva, Vinnytsia and Odessa. Mariupol is surrounded and under constant fire, the city is at risk of a humanitarian crisis as attempts to evacuate thousands of civilians through previously agreed "green corridor" have ended in attacks by the Russian military. There is a similarly difficult situation hindering the evacuation of the populations of Bucha and Irpin, located north-west of Kyiv. After 12 days of their offensive, the Russian military is in control of some of Ukraine's southern territories, including Kherson and Melitopol, with battles under way in Energograd and for Volnovakha. The Russian army is also conducting an assault towards Mykolaiv, and further north-west towards Voznesensk, but Ukrainian forces are able to counterattack effectively. In addition, the situation in the controlled areas is unstable, as shown by peaceful protests in places such as Kherson, Melitopol, Nova Kakhovka, Genichesk and Chonhar. Kharkiv continues to defend itself effectively despite a massed aerial attack. Ukrainian forces are succeeding in counterattacking, however this does not translate into any noticeable results.

The main goal of the Russian offensive is currently to surround Kyiv and force the capital to surrender. Bloody battles for Ivankov, Borodianka, Hostomel, Bucha and Irpin have led to major losses on the Russian side, nevertheless thanks to an all-out attack with air support the Russians are slowly approaching Kyiv, ruthlessly attacking Ukrainian towns and villages along the way. Ruined infrastructure causes major problems such as lack of access to water, heating and food, and the aggressor's operations hinder evacuation. Information is also surfacing that civilians are being used as human shields in order to prevent attacks on Russian army columns. Meanwhile Russian forces are attempting to encircle Kyiv from the north east. They are conducting an offensive from Chernihiv along the left bank of the Dnieper, heading towards the capital, while simultaneously attacking Brovary and Boryspol from the east and in the direction of Baturyn-Kipti. Ukrainian forces are repelling Russian attacks and Kyiv is successfully defending itself against being surrounded, although the movements of the Russian army suggest that within the next few days there will be an attempt to close the ring around Kyiv, which would result in extremely bloody battles and inevitable heavy losses both on the attacking and defending side.

The Russian military is still unable to achieve air superiority, probably as a result of deficiencies in the training of Russian pilots and of difficulties with coordinating a large-scale air attack. Meanwhile the Ukrainian air force and anti-aircraft defences are continually attacking enemy planes and helicopters. In the coming days, along with an intensification of the fighting for Kyiv the use of air power may become more frequent. The movements of the Russian army are also chaotic and inconsistent, as they encounter strong resistance in practically every direction of their assault. According to information from US and British intelligence, the Russians have sent in 95% of the forces which they gathered around the borders of Ukraine before the invasion. It will be difficult to continue the offensive without major reinforcement of the Russian army, especially as heavy losses, a lack of supplies and the treatment of dead soldiers are undermining Russian morale.

The Security Service of Ukraine and the Ukrainian military, including territorial defence units, continue to fight against saboteurs who inform the Russian army of the positions of Ukrainian forces, direct artillery fire and aircraft to targets on the ground and spread disinformation and Russian propaganda.

The attitude of the military and of society. The Ukrainian military and society have maintained high morale, which results from the state's well thought out information policy and the tactic of launching surprise attacks using modern

reconnaissance and attack drones, hand-held anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, and well-planned ambushes and operations behind enemy lines. Also of great significance is support from the West including financial assistance, supplies of weapons, humanitarian aid and actions against Russia involving sanctions and boycotts. The Russian forces were taken by surprise, especially in the first days, by the scale of Ukrainian resistance and by suffered losses in men and equipment. According to information from the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which is difficult to verify, by 6 March the Russians had lost over 11,000 soldiers, up to 285 tanks, 985 armoured vehicles, 109 artillery systems, 50 multiple rocket launchers, 21 anti-aircraft systems, 44 planes, 48 helicopters, 447 vehicles, 2 motor boats, 60 tankers and 4 unmanned aircraft.

Ukrainian morale has also been raised by information about citizens returning to Ukraine with the intention of defending their homeland (according to the Ukrainian authorities, over 70,000 have returned), and about foreign volunteers drawn to the International Legion of Territorial Defence (over 20,000 from 52 countries.) Another subject of speculation is the matter of post-Soviet military aircraft being supplied by NATO members, particularly Poland.

The humanitarian crisis. The Russian aggression employs elements aimed at weakening the Ukrainians' will to fight, such as mass rocket attacks, bombardments and artillery shelling. The Russian forces are increasingly aiming their strikes deliberately at civilian facilities and critical infrastructure. The aggressors want to cut off the population from supplies of running water, gas, electricity, food and medicines, in an attempt to force people to leave the cities and thus weaken the defences. As a result, we are seeing a deepening humanitarian crisis unfold in Ukraine, causing a mass exodus abroad. According to UN data, over 1.5 million war refugees have already left Ukraine, a million of whom have gone to Poland. Most countries of the European Union have declared willingness to accept refugees as a gesture of solidarity with Ukraine. In addition, the United States want to send US\$2.75bn of humanitarian aid for these people, and the EU over €500m.

Conclusions. Significant losses and the inability to reach a quick conclusion have not deterred the Russian side from continuing their offensive and large scale attacks on Ukrainian positions. As they wage their war, the Russians are increasingly terrorising the population, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. In talks with the Israeli premier Naftali Bennett, Turkish President Recep Erdoğan and French President Emmanuel Macron, Vladimir Putin has stressed that halting the offensive is conditional on Ukraine's capitulation, a laying down of arms and acceptance of the Kremlin's conditions.

Ukraine continues to resist. The defending forces are being reinforced by volunteers joining territorial defence forces, which have grown by over 100,000 people since the start of the conflict. However, an increasingly tangible lack of weapons, ammunition and fuel is proving to be a serious problem. The high morale being maintained by the Ukrainian forces may be weakened by the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Russian-controlled regions, and by losses inflicted by aerial attacks.

In spite of the growing military censorship, dozens of anti-war protests were organised in Russia on 6 March. Thousands of people were detained. Russian society is more and more feeling the effects of personal and economic sanctions introduced after the attack on Ukraine. The rouble exchange rate has plummeted, prices of staple foods are rising dramatically and sales limits are being introduced to prevent hoarding.

Peace talks announced for 7 March will undoubtedly bring none of the expected results. The Russian side does not want to face humiliation by abandoning its demands. Ukraine cannot agree to them, as that would mean an end to its sovereignty. The further course of the war will be decided by armed operations in the coming days or even weeks.