

War in Ukraine The battleground

Moscow says it'll let civilians flee – to Russia

Ukraine calls move an immoral stunt to exploit suffering of people under attack

LVIV/IRPIN (Ukraine) • Moscow said yesterday it would provide corridors for residents of Ukraine's two main cities to flee to Russia and Belarus, a move Ukraine called an immoral stunt to exploit the suffering of civilians under Russian bombardment.

Russian and Ukrainian delegations assembled for a third round of talks in Belarus, both sides said. Two previous rounds yielded little beyond pledges to open routes for humanitarian access that have yet to be successfully implemented.

"In a few minutes, we will start talking to representatives of a country that seriously believes large-scale violence against civilians is an argument," Ukrainian negotiator Mykhailo Podolyak said on Twitter. "Prove that this is not the case."

Russia's announcement of "humanitarian corridors" came after two days of failed ceasefires to allow civilians to escape the besieged city of Mariupol, where hundreds of thousands are trapped without food and water, under relentless bombardment.

A corridor from Kyiv would lead to Russia's ally Belarus, while civilians from Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-biggest city, would be directed to Russia, according to maps published by the RIA news agency.

Russia's Defence Ministry said: "Attempts by the Ukrainian side to deceive Russia and the whole civilised world... are useless this time."

A spokesman for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the move was "completely immoral", and Russia was trying to "use peo-



ple's suffering to create a television picture".

"They are citizens of Ukraine, they should have the right to evacuate to the territory of Ukraine," the spokesman told Reuters.

More than 1.7 million Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion have so far crossed into Central Europe, the United Nations' refugee agency

said yesterday, as thousands more moved in that direction.

Sweeping sanctions have subjected Russia to isolation from global commerce never before visited on such a large economy. Global share prices plunged yesterday after Washington said it was considering extending sanctions to Russia's energy exports, until

now carved out from trade bans.

Russia is the world's biggest exporter of oil and gas. Brent crude prices briefly spiked above US\$139 a barrel yesterday, the closest in 14 years to the all-time high of US\$147. Investment banks say prices could approach US\$200 this year if Russian supply evaporates, with dire consequences for the global econ-



A Ukrainian soldier running to check on a family after a mortar round landed nearby as civilians tried to flee Irpin, a Kyiv suburb, on Sunday. PHOTO: NYTIMES

omy. Russia and Ukraine are also among the world's main exporters of food and industrial metals.

Russia denies deliberately targeting civilians. It calls the campaign it launched on Feb 24 a "special military operation" to disarm Ukraine and remove leaders it describes as neo-Nazis. Ukraine and its Western allies call this a transparent pretext for an invasion to conquer a nation of 44 million people.

The general staff of Ukraine's armed forces said Russian forces were "beginning to accumulate resources for the storming of Kyiv", a city of more than three million, after days of slow progress in their main advance south from Belarus.

Ukraine said 2,000 civilians were evacuated from Irpin, a Kyiv suburb that has been under heavy attack.

Reuters journalists in the town on Sunday witnessed residents running for their lives, carrying small children, pets and bags of belongings. Families dove for cover as explosions went off in the town and flames shot up into the sky. Panting with exhaustion and shock, they were helped onto busses by

Ukrainian troops.

The situation was quieter yesterday. Ukrainian police released footage of more civilians making their way out.

Ukraine said yesterday that its forces had retaken control of the town of Chuhuiv in the north-east, the site of heavy fighting for days, and of the strategic Mykolayiv airport in the south, which the regional governor said was under tank fire. Neither claim could be immediately verified.

The UN called for safe passage to reach people cut off from lifesaving aid across Ukraine.

The World Health Organisation said at least six people were confirmed to have been killed in nine attacks on healthcare facilities since the start of the war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Reuters that Moscow would halt operations if Ukraine ceased fighting, amended its Constitution to declare neutrality, and recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea and the independence of regions held by Russian-backed separatists. REUTERS

Moves to supply aircraft to Ukraine risk triggering Russian response

Arvind Jayaram

Moves by the US and its allies to supply Ukraine with military aircraft to fight off a Russian invasion while abstaining from the imposition of a no-fly zone over the war-torn country may trigger an aggressive response from Moscow, according to some experts.

Poland, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato), is apparently getting ready to supply Ukraine with some of its Russian-made MiG-29 fighter jets in return for F-16 aircraft from the United States. The move seeks to sidestep Russian President Vladimir Putin's threat of a broader war in case Nato interferes in the conflict by imposing a no-fly zone.

Russia is unlikely to take the Polish action lightly, said Dr Samir Puri, senior fellow in urban security and hybrid warfare at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

"It is actually quite a strong risk, but it is a much smaller risk than Nato itself flying in a no-fly zone," he said. However, "I would be surprised if it didn't elicit a response from Russia in some way, shape or form", he added.

Dr Rajorshi Roy, an associate fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi, concurred.

"This would likely lead to an escalation with unpredictable consequences, especially since Russia may then expand the ambit of the present conflict beyond Ukraine into Eastern Europe," he told The Straits Times.

The strategy to "backfill" Poland for any fighter jets it sends to Ukraine received the green light from the Biden administration, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Sunday.

There were concerns, though, about how the jets would be transferred to Ukraine, Mr Blinken said.

The Russian Defence Ministry on Sunday warned Ukraine's neigh-

bours, including Romania, against hosting Ukrainian aircraft, saying that this could be regarded as their involvement in the armed conflict.

The delivery of more aircraft is critical for Ukraine, said Dr Puri. "I imagine it is important to maintain a viable air force because the Ukrainian air force is clearly a lot smaller than the Russians' – even if they are inflicting one-for-one losses on each other, or frankly even if the Ukrainians inflicted slightly higher losses on the Russian air force than it has already suffered," he said.

"They are suffering losses, and we know that," Dr Puri said, referring to the Ukrainians. "There was a famous Ukrainian airshow pilot who came out of retirement to fly his aircraft. He was killed, and there was a eulogy online for him. So, clearly the Ukrainians are losing aircraft and they don't have the depth of forces to maintain an air force, so they have to be provided with these aircraft."

Nevertheless, Dr Puri noted that Russia could still resort to its vastly superior air force in such a scenario. "I think it is possible if Ukrainians are given more aircraft, they will genuinely use the ability to contest the airspace air-to-air and the Russian offensive could then step into a different gear, if that is indeed something that has actually been inhibiting Russia's progress so far," said Dr Puri.

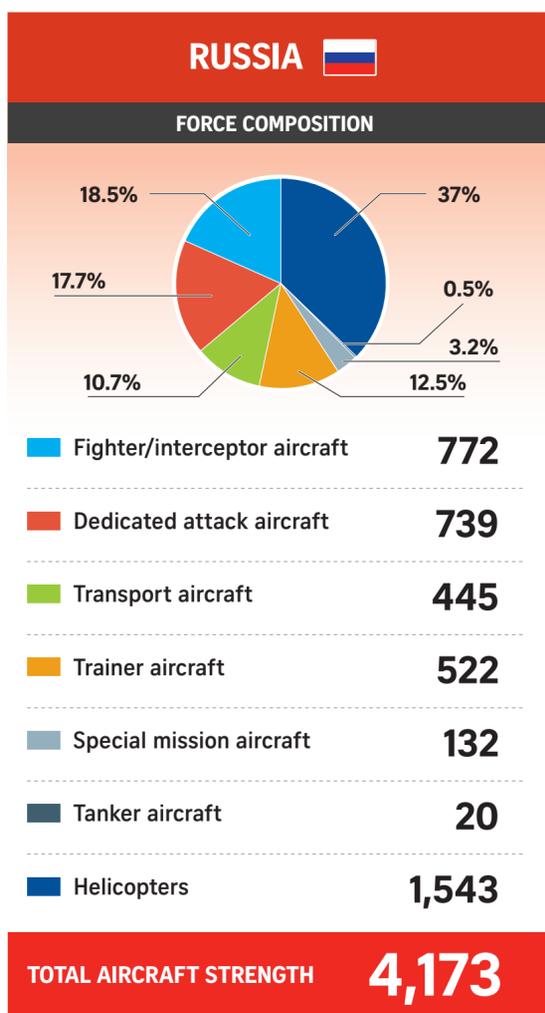
Russia's failure to make use of its air superiority during the invasion has baffled many experts. "It has been speculated that Russia lacks precision-guided ammunition that could take out the entire Ukrainian air defence. Yet, this could also be a tactical move," said Dr Roy.

"Perhaps, at present, Russia is not aiming for complete air dominance involving western Ukraine, but is focusing on areas of operational relevance. And that Russia would seek the objective of air dominance before the final push," said Dr Roy.

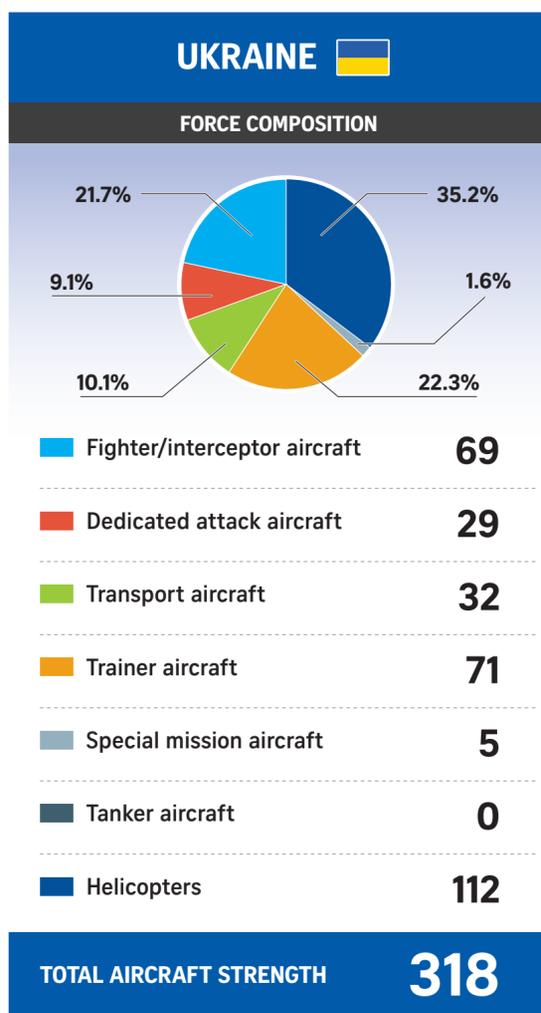
Dr Puri also expressed surprise with the lack of Russian dominance over the skies. "Those who have

Air war above Ukraine

Russia's air force is vastly superior to Ukraine's, but Moscow has been cautious to not let numbers dictate its strategy in the skies



NOTE: Percentages may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.



Source: GLOBALFIREPOWER 2022 REPORT STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

been studying the Russian armed forces would have assumed that they would have established air dominance quite quickly," he said.

He said this either indicated that the Russian military did not have the capability to coordinate complex operations involving dozens of aircraft, or that the planes were being held back for a later stage in the conflict. "The other observa-

tion to make is that the Ukrainian and Russian armed air forces operate similar aircraft. That may also be something of a factor in terms of the match between the aircraft being flown," said Dr Puri.

Nevertheless, Russia was more than capable of compensating for this lack of air superiority with ground-launched munitions, such as artillery, multiple rocket launch

systems and – if they want to employ them – ballistic missiles, said the IISS senior fellow.

"So, they can still bombard Ukrainian cities without air strikes. But one would imagine that having air strikes in addition would add to the Russian offensive," he said.

Dr Roy said controlling the skies remains a key objective of modern

day warfare, and Ukraine is no exception. "Given the Russian military convoy snaking into Kyiv, it would appear imperative for Russia to control the skies in order to protect its vital assets. In the same vein, control of the skies would give Russia's adversaries a distinct military advantage," he said.

arvindj@sph.com.sg