



News | Russia-Ukraine war

## Kyiv says Bakhmut situation 'critical' as Wagner claims control

*Ukraine rejects claim, says heavy fighting continues in the city and describes the situation there as 'critical'.*



Founder of Wagner private mercenary group Yevgeny Prigozhin makes a statement as he stands next to Wagner fighters in Bakhmut, Ukraine [Press service of 'Concord'/Handout via Reuters]

20 May 2023

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The head of the Russian private army Wagner has said his fighters have completed the [capture of Bakhmut](#) in eastern Ukraine, but Kyiv immediately rejected the claim and said fighting was still going on.

Yevgeny Prigozhin made the claim in a video on Saturday in which he appeared in combat fatigues in front of a line of fighters holding Russian flags and Wagner banners. ○

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“Today, at 12 noon, Bakhmut was completely taken,” Prigozhin said. “We completely took the whole city, from house to house.

“The operation to capture Bakhmut – the Bakhmut meat grinder – lasted 224 days,” he said.

But Ukraine said it retained some ground control in the eastern city of Bakhmut, with fighting continuing and the situation “critical”.

“Heavy fighting in Bakhmut. The situation is critical,” Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar posted on Telegram. She said Ukrainian troops were “holding the defence” in the city’s “Airplane area”.

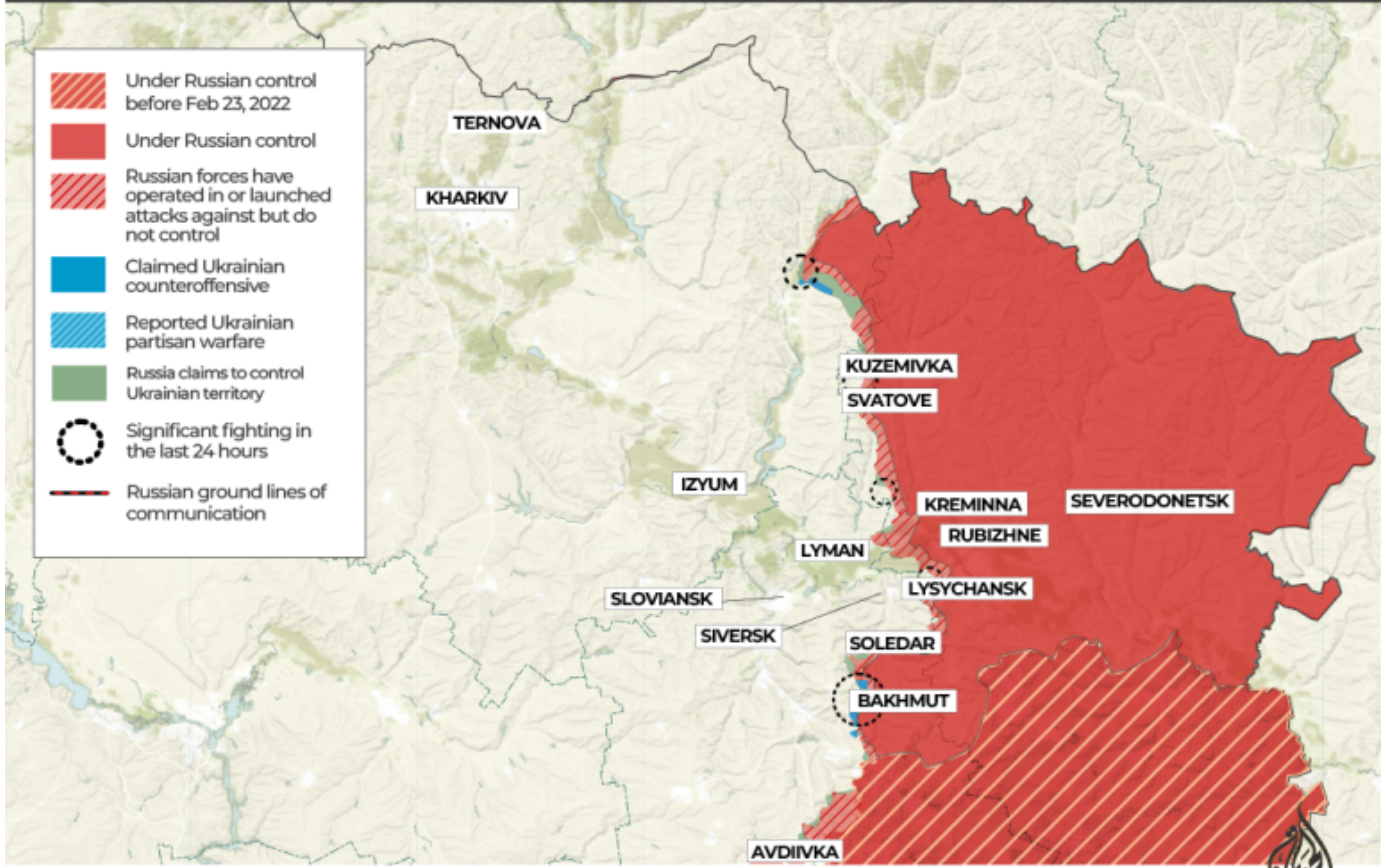
“As of now, our defenders control certain industrial and infrastructure facilities in the area.”

## RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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Russian forces have continued to make incremental gains in Bakhmut and conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Kupiansk, along the Svatove-Kreminna line and around the Avdiivka and Donetsk city line, according to the Institute for the Study of War.

Day 449 - May 18 | 09:00 GMT



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Ukrainian military spokesperson Serhii Cherevatyi told the Reuters news agency: “Our units are fighting in Bakhmut.”

Al Jazeera was not able to verify the claims.

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Journalist Yulia Shapovalova, reporting from Moscow, told Al Jazeera that this isn't the first time Prigozhin has made a statement like this.

“Earlier he repeatedly reported about the capture of Bakhmut but every time it turned out to be wrong. The Russian authorities have not commented on his statements,” she said.

“Earlier the Russian defence ministry official representative said that they... continue operations to liberate the western part of this city.

“A big question now – who's going to hold the city if the Ukrainian forces are not withdrawing and according to Prigozhin, the city will be handed over the Ministry of Defence?”

Bakhmut has been the focus of the longest and bloodiest battle of Russia's war in Ukraine, which is nearly at the end of its 15th month.

The battle has flattened the salt-mining centre that once had a population of approximately 70,000 people.

Distant explosions could be heard in the background as Prigozhin spoke during the video, in which he said his forces would withdraw from Bakhmut from May 25 for rest and retraining, handing over control to the regular Russian army.

Prigozhin taunted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and US President Joe Biden, who were [taking part in a G7 summit in Japan](#) on Saturday where the Ukraine war was front of mind for world leaders.



Addressing Zelenskyy, Prigozhin said, “Today, when you see Biden, kiss him on the top of his head, say hi to him from me.”

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Ukraine's Zelenskyy makes surprise visit to Saudi Arabia

Al Jazeera's Natacha Butler, reporting from Kyiv, said the timing of Prigozhin's announcement is “significant” as his comments are “perhaps aimed to try and embarrass the Ukrainian president.

“Let's not forget that Russia used to be part of the G7 – then the G8 – before it was kicked out in 2014 after illegally annexing Crimea,” Butler said.

“Here, Moscow is looking at these images of Zelenskyy talking to the world's wealthiest nations, this elite club it was once part of ... but also talking over the past few days and on the sidelines of this G7, with some of Russia's allies.

“Zelenskyy had meetings with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, but also with Narendra Modi of India, so no doubt, all of those optics are infuriating for Moscow.”

In his video message, Prigozhin also repeated complaints he has frequently made in the past that his forces suffered far heavier losses than necessary because of inadequate support and ammunition supplies from Russia's regular army.

Earlier this month he had [threatened to pull his forces out](#) after publishing a furious tirade against Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu while standing in a field of bloodied corpses.

Because of Russian bureaucracy and the "whims" of Shoigu and Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov, "five times more guys died than they should have", he said in Saturday's video.

"One day in history, they will pay for their actions," Prigozhin said.

His victory claim followed fierce fighting around the city in the past week in which Ukraine said it [pushed back some Russian forces](#).

British defence intelligence said on Saturday it was "highly likely" that Russia had deployed up to several battalions to reinforce the Bakhmut sector, following Ukrainian tactical gains on the flanks of the town. It said this represented a "notable commitment by the Russian command".

"Russia's leadership likely continue to see capturing Bakhmut as the key immediate war aim which would allow them to claim some degree of success in the conflict," it said on Twitter.

Prigozhin has acknowledged that Bakhmut had no strategic significance, but it took on huge symbolic importance for both sides because of the sheer intensity of the fighting and the scale of losses.

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