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EUROPE

Burst Dam Alters Ukraine Battlefield as Floodwaters Rise

Residents rush to save belongings as inundation compounds tragedy of war

By *Matthew Luxmoore* [Follow](#) and *Isabel Coles* [Follow](#)

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KHERSON, Ukraine—Floodwaters continued to rise on Wednesday after a major dam and power station in a Russian-occupied part of Ukraine were destroyed, forcing thousands of people to flee their homes and throwing a curveball on the battlefield.

The rupture on Tuesday has added another dimension to a humanitarian crisis resulting from a war that has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions. It unleashed a torrent of water that inundated dozens of towns and villages along the Dnipro River separating Russian and Ukrainian-held parts of the southern Kherson region.

Neither side has released a figure of fatalities from the incident, which is likely to leave lasting scars in southern Ukraine and threatens to pollute waterways, severely damage the local habitat and force farmers out of business.

Ukraine has accused Russia of blowing up the dam, which will likely affect Kyiv's plans for a long-awaited counteroffensive that appeared to be under way in recent days, while also washing away Russian fortifications along the Dnipro River that were meant to ward off a Ukrainian river crossing.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said Wednesday that the destruction of the dam left hundreds of thousands of people without normal access to drinking water and said Russia was attempting to "use the flood as a weapon."



Images from Maxar Technologies show the before and after effects of the flooding. PHOTO: MAXAR TECHNOLOGIES / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Russia, in turn, blamed Kyiv for sabotaging the dam. Western intelligence agencies, including in the U.S., are working to determine who is responsible for the dam breach, but are leaning toward Russia, a Western official said.

Local authorities in the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Kherson region said flooding was expected to peak later on Wednesday. Nearly 2,000 homes on the western bank of the river have already been flooded, said the head of the Kherson region's military administration, Oleksandr Prokudin.

A major evacuation effort was under way in Kherson, as residents sought to save some of their belongings from the rising waters.

In the village of Darivka on a tributary of the Dnipro River, Andriy Dubyna walked knee-deep in water through his living room early Wednesday to retrieve his laptop and other

valuable possessions. When he returned in the afternoon after leaving things at a friend's place, the water was up to his chest.

His wife and two children had moved to central Ukraine to flee the Russian occupation last summer while he stayed to keep his job as a mechanic, but now he didn't know what to do. "We've been through everything, and still most of us refused to leave," he said. "But this is too much." His house is built on a clay foundation, he said, and will most likely collapse before the water recedes.

Soldiers guarding the entrance to a partially submerged bridge in Darivka said the flooding isn't their only concern: Russian artillery struck the village on Tuesday, continuing a pattern of regular strikes that even the dam's destruction hasn't paused.

On Wednesday, authorities in the Russian-occupied part of Kherson region declared a state of emergency as a result of flooding at the Kakhovka hydroelectric-power station, which supplies electricity to three million people. Local Russian-installed officials said that more than 4,000 people had been evacuated as of Wednesday.



Streets and buildings in Kherson, Ukraine, are flooded following a dam breach. PHOTO: LIBKOS/ASSOCIATED PRESS



The rupture of the dam adds to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. PHOTO: REUTERS

The flooding was the latest blow to Kherson, the regional capital that lived through eight months of Russian occupation, months of relentless bombardment after Ukraine retook it in November and now a new humanitarian crisis. Some residents took the latest catastrophe in stride.

“What’s happening now isn’t as frightening as our life under occupation,” said Volodymyr Barsuk, a retired firefighter living on the third floor of a building in south Kherson that has been partly submerged by floodwater.

Hours after the dam burst on Tuesday, Barsuk was still able to walk through his street and didn’t plan on relocating. But when he woke up early on Wednesday and looked out of his window, he saw that the first floor of the building was underwater. He packed his documents and a few items of clothing and got on a boat manned by local volunteers helping people reach dry ground.

There are plenty of vacant apartments in Kherson, which saw an exodus of inhabitants after Russia began shelling the city following its withdrawal in the fall. Barsuk said he would stay with friends and return to his home when the flood recedes.

Volunteers were trying to find accommodation for Yuriy Meilikh, a 67-year-old electrician who fled his second-floor apartment. “When you live next to a mad neighbor, this is what you get,” Meilikh said as he wrung out drenched trousers he salvaged from his apartment.

Despite repeated crises, few people were trying to leave Kherson altogether. At the railway station, a small crowd waited on Wednesday to board trains to Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, and Lviv in the west. But when a train arrived at the station, an even larger crowd disembarked

—many of them former residents who left when the Russians arrived but who are now returning to reclaim their homes, despite the flooding.

“They may bomb us, there may be floods, but there’s nothing like being home,” said Lyuba Kisil, who returned to Kherson after nine months away on Wednesday with her 11-year-old daughter Daria, after failing to find work in central Ukraine. Her house near the river is underwater, but she said she would stay with relatives.

Dam Breach

According to the Ukrainian government, thousands of people have been evacuated after the rupture of the dam on Tuesday.

The extent of flooding following the destruction of the Kakhovka dam



Note: Flooding as of June 7

Sources: EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre (critical infrastructure); ICEYE (flood estimate)
Carl Churchill/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The dam’s structure is likely to deteriorate further in coming days, the U.K.’s Ministry of Defense said, anticipating additional flooding. The entire eastern part of the dam, as well as a significant part of the hydro and engineering infrastructure, is destroyed, it said.

But the ministry allayed concerns that dropping water levels in the reservoir, which were at a record high before the breakthrough, would create additional safety issues at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear-power plant, which sits 120 kilometers upstream of the dam and relies on the reservoir to cool its reactors.

The dam contained about 18 billion cubic meters of water, according to Ukrainian officials, and flooding endangers more than 80 settlements, including the major regional capital of

Kherson. It had already suffered damage in October when sections of it and sluice gates were destroyed as Russian forces sought to retreat from Kherson amid an ultimately successful Ukrainian offensive to retake the southern city. Ukraine and Russia at the time accused each other of plans to blow up the dam.

Ukrainian forces on the west side of the river were forced to evacuate under artillery fire from Russian forces on the east side, said the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank.

With the river now impassable, Russia could redeploy resources from the southwest to reinforce other sections of the front, according to military analysts.

The exact target of the counteroffensive has been closely guarded by Kyiv, but military experts have long said one of its main goals could be to sever the land bridge built between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula that Moscow annexed in 2014. The flooded region would have been one pathway to do so.



Rescue service workers and volunteers evacuate residents from flooded areas in Kherson, Ukraine. PHOTO: SERHII KOROVAYNY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Red Cross volunteers assist a woman in Kherson. PHOTO: REUTERS

Still, military analysts had seen a Ukrainian assault across the river as an unlikely option, given the difficulty and likely cost of such an operation, as well as Ukraine's lack of amphibious capabilities.

Military analysts said the flooding was also likely to wash away fortifications and minefields put up by Russian forces in the area, though some of those would pose a risk to civilians as they were swept away. The dam system also supplied water to Crimea.

Homeowners and farmers continued to count the cost of the flooding. The effects of the dam collapse go far beyond those whose homes and businesses were flooded and across a wide slice of southeast Ukraine that is irrigated by the reservoir.

Before the invasion, Oleksiy Fokardi, 43, bought around 5,000 acres of land in the southern Zaporizhzhia region to plant walnut orchards that were irrigated from water from the giant reservoir. Fokardi, who fled the area when Russia invaded and now lives in western Ukraine, believes that these orchards will die. "This dream is dead, all orchards there will die without irrigation," he said.

The river itself was used to transport some 60 million metric tons of cargo annually at a third of the cost of taking it that distance by road, according to Nibulon, the Ukrainian grain trader that helped rebuild the waterway's infrastructure after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Much of that infrastructure in the south has been hit by the flooding, adding to damage from the war, a Nibulon spokeswoman said.

Ukrainian government officials also fret about the effect on fish and other wildlife in the river and in the Black Sea that it feeds. Social-media accounts showed footage of thousands of fish dead or dying on what they said were recently flooded land in the Dnipropetrovsk region in southeastern Ukraine.

The spawning period for fish has just ended and this spawn will dry out as reservoir levels fall and floodwaters recede lower down the river, according to the country's Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food. Fish swept into the salty Black Sea will likely die, while wildlife there will suffer from the sudden influx of freshwater, the ministry said, calculating a loss of some 95,000 metric tons of fish in what it called a preliminary estimate.



A view of the Dnipro river in Kherson, Ukraine. PHOTO: SERHII KOROVAYNY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

—*Alistair MacDonald and Ann M. Simmons contributed to this article.*

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Corrections & Amplifications

A dam that was destroyed in a Russian-occupied part of Ukraine contained about 18 billion cubic meters of water. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said it contained about 18 million cubic meters of water. In addition, Ukraine's Kakhovka dam was misspelled as Kakhova in a map with an earlier version of this article. (Corrected on June 8)

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