Top Ukrainian interior ministry officials die in helicopter crash

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At least 14 people, including one child, have been confirmed dead on Wednesday after a helicopter carrying the top leadership of Ukraine's interior ministry crashed over a kindergarten in Brovary, a town near the capital Kiev. Another 25 people were injured and hospitalized, among them 11 children. The crash occurred around 8:20 a.m. local time, as parents were dropping off their children at the kindergarten. According to Ukrainian officials, the helicopter was on its way to a "hot spot" on the frontline of the war. The rescue operation took almost nine hours.

All people on board the helicopter were killed, among them Ukraine's Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky, his first deputy Yevhen Yenin and the Ministry's State Secretary Yurii Lubkovych. Monastyrsky's bodyguards and aides were also killed. In total, five officials of the Interior Ministry and one official of the National Police died in the crash. The pilot and the crew were killed as well.

Monastyrsky was the highest-ranking Ukrainian government official to have died since the beginning of the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine in February 2022. As both Interior Minister and a member of the National Security and Defense Council, which is responsible for setting wartime goals, Monastyrsky was one of the most important figures in the military leadership and responsible for overseeing domestic security, including the police. He was a member of Zelensky's Servant of the People party and considered one of Zelensky's closest allies.

Monastyrsky, Yenin and Lubkovych all assumed their positions in the Interior Ministry in the immediate lead-up to the war in the second half of 2021, as part of a major reshuffle at the Interor Ministry that followed the resignation of Monastyrsky's predecessor, Arseny Avakov. They counted among the most prominent government representatives during the war and frequently visited the troops on the frontline.

As of this writing, there has been no official explanation for the crash. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky described it as a "terrible tragedy." In an address to the World Economic Forum in Davos later that day, Zelensky appealed again for more Western military support for Ukraine and declared that "there are no accidents at war time. These are all war results absolutely."

Zelensky ordered the Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU) to initiate a criminal investigation. The SBU is reportedly focusing on three possible causes: technical malfunction, the violation of flight rules and sabotage.

Igor Klimenko, the head of Ukraine's National Police, has been appointed acting interior minister by Zelensky.

Whatever the causes of the crash, the sudden death of three of the country's most important government officials is set to further destabilize the already tense political situation in the country and deepen Ukraine's political crisis. The crash comes amidst a rapid escalation of the war against Russia by NATO and reports suggesting that Ukraine may be preparing an offensive.

Over the past few weeks, NATO has taken major steps to intensify its involvement in the war. Several countries, including Germany, are now sending tanks and other offensive weaponry to Ukraine. The US alone has delivered 210 howitzers, and Ukraine has received more than 400 self-propelled artillery pieces from Britain, Poland, Germany and the US. Last Friday, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov bluntly stated in an interview with the BBC that Ukraine is a "member of NATO de facto."

On Monday, leading officials of the White House, the

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US State Department and the Pentagon were in Kiev for discussions with Zelensky, Reznikov and other top Ukrainian officials. Among them were Wendy Sherman, the US Deputy Secretary of State; Jonathan Finer, Biden's Deputy National Security Advisor, and Colin Kahl, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy at the Pentagon. According to the official press release, the goal of the meeting was to "reaffirm the United States' strong and steadfast commitment to Ukraine and its defense against Russia's unprovoked aggression."

On Friday, the head of the US Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley and Defense Minister Lloyd Austin will conduct the first in-person meeting with the Ukrainian Defense Contact group, which comprises 50 nations, at the US military base in Ramstein, Germany.

On Monday, Milley already visited a new US military training site for Ukrainian troops in Grafenwöhr, Germany. According to the Associated Press, over 600 Ukrainian troops have just started receiving training from the US army there.

In the Russian press, military figures are arguing that the Russian army must be prepared for a renewed Ukrainian offensive within the next couple of weeks. Speaking to the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, retired Lieutenant General Yuri Netkachev stated, "There should be no illusions that the Americans are only training one battalion of the Ukrainian army with 500 troops in Germany. Judging by comments from Mark Milley, the elite of the Ukrainian army is concentrated in Grafenwöhr. These are commanders of formations, strike units, crews, IT specialists. These are the people who already by the end of February, according to the plans of the Pentagon, will be organizing future offensive actions by the Ukrainian armed forces."

Netkachev added that with the massive deliveries of heavy weaponry to Ukraine, NATO "is helping Kiev to form several mechanized and motorized infantry brigades. And in general [the weapons serve] to complete the three army corps, which are now being formed in the Ukrainian armed forces for the general offensive in a few weeks. The Russian army must be prepared for this."

A recent report by the Institute for Strategic Studies noted that the Kremlin is now "belatedly taking personnel mobilization, reorganization and industrial actions … steps to conduct the 'special military operation' as a major conventional war."

Already, the NATO-led escalation of the war has significantly deepened the political crisis in Ukraine. On Tuesday, one of Zelensky's top advisers and one of the most prominent faces of the war, Oleksiy Arestovych, was forced to resign. In remarks on live television on Saturday shortly after a missile strike on the city of Dnipro, Arestovych had suggested that the Russian missile hit a residential area after being shot down by the Ukrainian air defense. Arestovych's remarks prompted bitter denunciations, including by the far right, Zelensky and the head of the Ukrainian air defense, and he was forced to publicly apologize and resign within days.

Forty-five people were reportedly killed and 79 wounded in the incident, the highest civilian casualty figures in months. The Ukrainian government has used the incident to call on NATO to further step up its deliveries of heavy weaponry. Russian officials have denied responsibility for the strike, insisting that the Russian army was not targeting civilian infrastructure.

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