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Leaders | War in Ukraine

# A looming Russian offensive

Ukraine's chiefs, in an unprecedented series of briefings, tell The Economist about the critical months that lie ahead



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**R**USSIA IS MASSING men and arms for a new offensive. As soon as January, but more likely in the spring, it could launch a big attack from Donbas in the east, from the south or even from Belarus, a puppet state in the north. Russian troops will aim to drive back Ukrainian forces and could even stage a second attempt to take Kyiv, the capital.

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Those are not our words, but the assessment of the head of Ukraine's armed forces, General Valery Zaluzhny. In an unprecedented series of briefings within the past fortnight the general, along with Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, and General Oleksandr Syrsky, the head of its ground forces, warned us of the critical few months ahead. "The Russians are preparing some 200,000 fresh troops,"

General Zaluzhny told us. “I have no doubt they will have another go at Kyiv.” Western sources say that Russia’s commander, General Sergey Surovikin, has always seen this as a multi-year conflict.

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This is not the view outside Ukraine. In the freezing mud, the conflict is thought to be deadlocked. There has been almost no movement for a month along the 1,000km or so of battlefield. Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, Britain’s most senior officer, this week said that, right now, a shortage of artillery shells means Russia’s scope for ground operations is “rapidly diminishing”.

The appearance of stalemate is feeding new interest in

THE APPEARANCE OF STATEMENTS IS REFLECTING NEW INTEREST IN peace talks. France's president, Emmanuel Macron, America's Joe Biden and (for very different reasons) the Russian aggressor, Vladimir Putin, have all in recent days talked about a diplomatic solution. Many in the West, appalled at the suffering, and, more selfishly, wearying of high energy prices, would welcome this. But Ukraine's commanders argue that it should not happen too soon, and they are right.

If Ukraine sought to stop the war today, freezing the battle lines where they are, the Russians could prepare better for the next attack. Mr Putin's generals have been pushing on with their programme of training and deploying newly mobilised troops and retooling industry to help the war effort—including, say Ukrainian commanders, by producing artillery shells. A freeze would repeat the mistake of the three years leading up to the invasion on February 24th 2022. In that time Mr Putin talked endlessly to the West's leaders, who indulged him, while all the while readying his armies for invasion.

The West's highest responsibility is to ensure that any

Russian counter-offensive fails. For that, the supply of weapons must increase, and fast. Ukraine has used HIMARS, a rocket system the Americans have been supplying since June, to devastating effect against Russian ammunition dumps and command-and-control centres, allowing the rapid advance first in the north-east and then in the south. But Russia has moved many such targets back out of range of Ukraine's HIMARS batteries. So Ukraine needs more powerful ordnance, like the ATACMS missiles that could hit targets at least twice as far away. And it needs lots of them, as well as regular ammunition and artillery of all kinds; plus tanks and helicopters and much else, too.

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Ukraine also needs help repelling Russian attacks on civilian electrical, water and heating systems. These are aimed at wrecking Ukraine's economy as well as battering the morale of Ukrainian troops on the front line, who are worried about their families back home.

As General Zaluzhny explains, Ukraine is running low on stocks of ammunition for its existing defence