Zelensky accuses Russia of rejecting ceasefire as fresh strikes hit Ukraine

AFP- Ukraine on Wednesday accused Russia of effectively rejecting a US-backed ceasefire proposal, reporting a barrage of strikes on civilian infrastructure hours after Moscow agreed only to pause attacks on the energy grid.

Washington has been pushing for a full, 30-day ceasefire as a first step towards a wider settlement of the grinding three-year-old war.

But in a 90-minute call with US President Donald Trump on Tuesday, Russian leader Vladimir Putin refused, insisting that any such deal would be contingent on the West halting all military aid for Ukraine.

According to the Kremlin, Putin has already ordered his military to pause strikes against Ukrainian energy targets for 30 days.

The highly anticipated Putin-Trump call also resulted in an announcement that Russia and Ukraine will exchange 175 prisoners each on Wednesday.

While Zelensky welcomed the proposed energy truce, he also said he needed more “details” from Washington.

US envoy Steve Witkoff said ceasefire talks would pick up again on Sunday in Jeddah, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz leading the American delegation.

Moscow has launched devastating attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure throughout the war, while Ukraine has used drones to bomb multiple Russian oil installations.

Explosions rang out and air raid sirens wailed in Ukraine just hours after Trump and Putin spoke.

Zelensky said “there have been hits, specifically on civilian infrastructure”, including a hospital in Sumy.

“It is these types of nighttime attacks by Russia that destroy our energy sector, our infrastructure, and the normal life of Ukrainians,” Zelensky said.

“Today, Putin effectively rejected the proposal for a full ceasefire.”

Across the border, Russian emergency service officials said debris from a repelled Ukrainian drone attack ignited a fire at an oil depot in the village of Kavkazskaya.

In Kyiv, war-weary Ukrainians were doubtful of any ceasefire prospects.

“I don’t believe Putin at all, not a single word. He only understands force,” said Lev Sholoudko, 32.

– ‘Not ready’ –

Trump, who says he has an “understanding” with Putin, has been seeking a breakthrough in the Ukraine war since returning to the White House in January.

He stunned the world when he announced he had started direct talks with Russia to end the conflict, sparking fears among allies that he was pivoting too far towards Moscow.

The US president hailed his latest call with Putin as “good and productive”, and the White House said in a readout that the Russian leader had consented to a 30-day ceasefire on energy infrastructure.

But Moscow also underlined that a fuller truce was dependent on long-standing demands for a “complete cessation” of Western

military and intelligence support to Ukraine’s embattled military.

A Kremlin statement also emphasised that Kyiv could not rearm or mobilise during any ceasefire.

Zelensky – who accepted a full ceasefire proposal during talks in Saudi Arabia last week – has lashed out at Russia for its reluctance to reach a deal.

“They are not ready to end this war, and we can see that.”

Zelensky also said that Ukrainian troops would continue fighting in Russia’s Kursk region “as long as we need”, following days of major Russian advances in the area that Kyiv partially seized last year.

– ‘Count on us’ –

Russia said on Tuesday that Ukrainian forces attempted a ground assault on the Belgorod region earlier but were pushed back, casting it as an attempt to undermine the Trump talks.

Trump has been intent on delivering on an election pledge to end the war in Ukraine, blaming his predecessor Joe Biden’s policy on Russia for fueling the war.

Trump has pursued a sharply different tack, upending years of US policy staunchly backing Ukraine, most evident in his televised shouting match with Zelensky in the Oval Office.

Western allies remain sceptical that Putin is ready for a ceasefire.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron vowed after the Kremlin statement that they would keep sending military aid to Ukraine.

“Ukraine can count on us,” Scholz said.

As the talks were underway, soldiers on Ukraine’s front line

also remained doubtful.

“How can you trust people who attack you and kill civilians, including children?” said Oleksandr, 35, who has returned to military training in the Donetsk region after being wounded in combat.

AFP