

Ukraine: Evacuation level increased due to scale of Russian military build-up, potential for escalation

OVERVIEW

 Level:	Evacuate: Full Evacuation
 Location:	Ukraine
 Category:	Conflict, Diplomatic issue

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We have increased our evacuation level for Ukraine to EVACUATE: FULL EVACUATION due to the scale of the Russian military build-up in areas bordering Ukraine, the potential for a rapid escalation into conflict and the current availability of evacuation options. This comes amid joint military exercises between Russia and Belarus, an increased Russian naval presence in the Black Sea, continued Russian military build-up in areas close to the Ukrainian border, the presence of a favourable 'window' for a Russian assault to occur and limited progress in high-level diplomatic talks. Based on the increasing likelihood of a military action by Russia **in the coming weeks** and the potential impact of a significant Russian incursion into Ukraine, we have made a risk-based decision to move to evacuate all workforce.

ADVICE

- Defer all travel to Ukraine until further notice.
- Foreign nationals and business travellers currently in Ukraine should depart. International SOS's team on the ground have confirmed that commercial air travel options are operating as normal. International SOS can support with air charter evacuations, subject to a security assessment by the aircraft operator at the time of request and regulations regarding COVID-19 testing and visa requirements at the passengers' destination(s).
- Secure any vacated offices and residences and review security measures in place for local national employees.

In-country workforce

- If determined to remain in country, a robust and resilient local assistance network (logistical, security and medical) should be in place, as well as access to secure accommodations, power, communications and fuel, food, water, medication and other goods. Maintain stocks of essential supplies at your accommodation. Preparations should include stockpiling food and water and ensuring access to backup power.
- Confirm that passports and visas are both up to date and on hand. Ensure that you are familiar with your company's evacuation, business-continuity and communications procedures. Evacuation plans should consider the lead time for visas and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests to be conducted for workforce and providers, and account for potential related delays to any travel plans.
- Abide by official directives, including any movement restrictions, curfews and road closures.
- Monitor our Ukraine alerts for updates.

MORE DETAIL

The main factors that have informed our change of the evacuation level for Ukraine are the potential for a rapid deterioration in the security environment, the current availability of evacuation options and the impact of a worst-case scenario involving a multi-modal Russian military assault on Ukraine, including aerial, naval, ground and/or cyber operations. Increased diplomatic warnings that a Russian military action could be imminent also indicate increased preparation for Russian military action. US officials have stated that they believe Russian president Vladimir Putin has not made the decision to take military action at this stage, but that a potential action could occur **in the coming days**.

On 10 February, the US advised its nationals to depart Ukraine. Australia, the UK and others have since followed suit. The US briefed several allies on 11 February on what it believes could be a potential course of military action for Russia. According to unofficial reports, the scenario consisted of airstrikes and cyberattacks being deployed in Ukraine, accompanied by Russian troops mobilising across the Belarus-Ukraine border. It is not clear if other scenarios were discussed. The US also said its intelligence specifically referenced **16 February** in relation to a potential action, though it acknowledged this specific date could be misinformation.

The warnings come amid ongoing joint military exercises between Russia and Belarus, which are set to continue **until 20 February**. The exercises include drills in areas close to the border with Ukraine. In recent days, there has also been a significant increase in Russian naval vessels in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov ahead of planned maritime drills **from 13 to 17 February**. On 11 February, Ukraine's military announced Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces had also commenced military drills. While Ukraine has sought to downplay the threat posed by Russia's military build-up on its border in recent weeks, it has issued warnings over the last few days based on Russia's naval presence and the reported drills in separatist-held territories.

Diplomatic efforts continue, with Putin due to speak with both US president Joe Biden and French president Emmanuel Macron on **12 February**. Progress in such talks has so far been limited and the outlook for a de-escalation has decreased in recent days. Meanwhile, the US is strengthening its presence in countries bordering Ukraine and deployed an additional 3,000 troops to Poland on 11 February, though this is unlikely to deter a Russian military action.

ASSESSMENT

The likelihood of a Russian military action has increased amid very limited diplomatic progress on Russia's security demands to the US and NATO, the deployment of sufficient military forces to conduct an invasion, increased Russian military and naval drills in the vicinity of Ukraine and a comparatively favourable 'window' of time to conduct such operations linked to both the weather and the impact of maintaining such a high proportion of Russia's offensive military capability focused on one target. This 'window' is assessed to last **until the end of March**, though there remains a credible threat beyond that.

The exact nature of any military action is increasingly unclear. Key objectives for Russia include the destabilisation of the Ukrainian government at a minimum and its removal at a maximum.

Russia's military options continue to include limited military action, particularly in eastern Ukraine, combined with continued diplomatic pressure, given the human and economic costs of a more expansive military action and the political, strategic and diplomatic gains Russia would achieve in this scenario. However, recent events have raised the likelihood of a more expansive and impactful military assault to achieve long-standing Russian objectives, including a more long-term solution for Ukraine not joining NATO.

This more impactful scenario would be a multi-modal assault on key Ukrainian military – and potentially some critical civilian – infrastructure in pursuit of a compellence strategy, entailing a combination of cyber, land, aerial and naval military actions. Russian action is likely to focus on achieving an immediate political outcome without the need for a long-term occupation given the human, economic and political costs such a protracted occupation would generate. Locations in the east of the country close to separatist-held breakaway territories, in addition to locations close to strategic military or civilian assets and/or in proximity to Russian military assets, will face a higher level of threat in this scenario. Due to the significance and impact, the capital Kyiv may also be targeted. Disruptive countrywide cyberattacks on communications, banking and other key nodes would likely be impactful, irrespective of location. Given the impact of a large-scale Russian military incursion and the fact that even initial military movements may lead to the suspension of travel options out of the country at short notice, we are escalating our level of evacuation advice.

MANAGER ADVICE

- Evacuate all workforce using commercial air options. Consider approaching international air carriers, charter companies and external support providers (including International SOS) if required.
- Notify workforce of the increased level of evacuation preparedness and manage expectations as to the timeframe for any potential departure from the country. Ensure that robust, flexible and practical evacuation and contingency plans are in place and can be implemented effectively.
- Check that all potential evacuees and dependents have up-to-date passports and visas, and that manifests are up to date and on hand.
- Ensure local national workforce monitor developments closely and confirm any local official guidance on emergency procedures. Ensure you have all necessary contact details, locations and other relevant information for local national employees. Confirm arrangements for internal relocation if required, including access to accommodation and vehicles.
- Ensure business-continuity measures are in place and manage any potential shutdown procedures as required. Ensure workforce have access to reliable communications systems and that they understand whom to contact in the event of a security or medical emergency. A satellite telephone should be available as backup to increase resilience. Communicate verified information to mitigate the risk of misinformation.
- COVID-19-related restrictions at your workforce's final destination(s) should be taken into account if you decide to withdraw international assignees and dependents. Evacuation plans should consider the lead time for PCR tests to be conducted for workforce and providers and account for potential related delays to any travel plans.

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