

UKRAINE GOVT. HOLDS KYIV, AGREES FOR TALKS

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But Mr. Putin, who has described the invasion as a “special military operation”, thrust an alarming new element into play on Sunday when he ordered Russia’s deterrence forces — a reference to units which include nuclear arms — on high alert.

He cited aggressive statements by NATO leaders and economic sanctions imposed by the West against Moscow.

Mr. Putin previously referred to his nuclear arsenal in a speech prior to the start of the invasion on Thursday, saying Russia’s response to any country that tried to hinder the operation would be immediate and carry “consequences that you have never encountered in your history.”

France’s Foreign Minister retorted the same day that when making such threats Mr. Putin should remember that NATO too was a nuclear alliance. Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Mr. Putin’s deterrence order was an attempt to pressure Kyiv during talks but it would not be cowed. If Mr. Putin used nuclear weapons against Ukraine it would be a catastrophe for the world, he said. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told CBS: “President Putin is continuing to escalate this war in a manner that is totally unacceptable and we have to continue to stem his actions in the strongest possible way”.

Burning cloud

In other developments, Russian troops blew up a natural gas pipeline in Kharkiv before daybreak, a Ukrainian state agency said, sending up a burning cloud.

Russian soldiers and armoured vehicles rolled into Kharkiv, located in Ukraine’s northwest and its second largest city, on Sunday and witnesses reported firing and explosions. But city authorities said Ukrainian fighters had repelled the attack.

“Control over Kharkiv is completely ours! The armed forces, the police, and the defence forces are working, and the city is being completely cleansed of the enemy,” regional Governor Oleh Sinegubov said.

Ukrainian forces were also holding off Russian troops advancing on Kyiv.

“We have withstood and are successfully repelling enemy attacks. The fighting goes on,” Mr. Zelenskiy said in a video message from the streets of Kyiv.

A U.N relief agency said more than 368,000 refugees, have crossed into neighbouring countries, clogging railways, roads and borders. At least 198 Ukrainians, including three children, have been killed in the invasion, the head of Ukraine’s Health Ministry said.

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