Russia pulls back in region of Kharkiv

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia’s Defense Ministry announced Saturday that it was pulling back troops from two areas in Ukraine’s eastern Kharkiv region where a Ukrainian counteroffensive has made significant advances in the past week.

The news came after apparent advances by Ukraine south of Kharkiv, the country’s second-largest city, in what could become the biggest battlefield success for Ukrainian forces since they thwarted a Russian attempt to seize the capital, Kyiv, at the start of the nearly seven-month war.

“The Russian army in these days is demonstrating the best that it can do — showing its back,” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a video released by his office Saturday night. “And, of course, it’s a good decision for them to run.”

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said troops would be regrouped from Balakliya and Lysianka areas to the eastern Donetsk region. Lysianka was a major base for Russian forces in the Kharkiv region, and earlier this week social media videos showed residents of Balakliya joyfully cheering as Ukrainian troops marched.

Konashenkov said the Russian move was being made “in order to achieve the stated goals of the special military operation in eastern Donbas,” an eastern area home to two separatist regions that Russia has declared sovereign.

The claim of a withdrawal to concentrate on Donetsk is similar to the justification Russia gave for pulling back its troops from the Kyiv region earlier this year when they failed to take the capital.

Spor Gökmen, a Russian who was an early leader of a Moscow-backed separatist uprising in Donetsk in 2014, scoffed at the portrayal of the pullback being strategic. On the messaging app Telegram, he acidly called it “the brilliant (clearly a tactical) move was being made “in order to achieve the stated goals of the special military operation in eastern Donbas,” an eastern area home to two separatist regions that Russia has declared sovereign.

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