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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Clara Weiss

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Russia-Ukraine stand-off over Azov Sea continues as Poroshenko declares martial law

Following Russia's capture of three Ukrainian vessels on Sunday in the Azov Sea, the Ukrainian government, at the behest of President Petro Poroshenko and the War Cabinet, has introduced martial law starting November 28 for 30 days. On Monday, the Ukrainian armed forces also announced that they were fully combat ready. Meanwhile, US media foreign policy and think tank officials have been beating the war drum, urging a "tough" response to alleged "Russian aggression" by the Ukraine, NATO and the US.

The Azov Sea borders southwestern Russia, the southeast of Ukraine as well as Crimea, and enters into the Black Sea, which is of key geostrategic significance to both the US and Russia, as a water gateway to the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

The stand-off occurred at the Kerch Strait, which is the only link between both seas and has been largely under the control of Russia since Moscow's annexation of Crimea in early 2014. In the most significant direct confrontation between the Russian and Ukrainian military since 2014, Russian warships fired at and captured three Ukrainian vessels after they entered Russian territorial waters. Several Ukrainian sailors were wounded. Russian media have called it a "veritable maritime battle." Initially shut down by Russia, the Kerch Strait has now been reopened for civilian ships.

The Kiev regime, brought to power in an imperialist-backed, far-right coup in February 2014, had so far refrained from introducing martial law, despite an ongoing civil war in the east of the country that has claimed the lives of over 10,000 people. Poroshenko initially declared martial law for 60 days, but then reduced the duration to 30 days,

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following a public outcry. He also insisted in a statement that the declaration of martial law in response to Russia's "aggression" did not mean an open declaration of war with Russia.

The introduction of martial law by Poroshenko is a transparent attempt to exploit the crisis to intensify the far-advanced drive toward dictatorial rule in dealing with an ever deepening domestic crisis. Martial law is being imposed in the midst of a campaign for the March 2018 presidential elections in which Poroshenko is performing worse than all other candidates in the polls and is almost certain to lose his bid for reelection.

Nearly five years after the beginning of the conflict with Russia, some one million Ukrainians are on the verge of starvation, hundreds of thousands have left the country to live and work abroad; and thousands of workers have been going on strike to protest starvation-level wages. There is also enormous anger about the government's open ties to and reliance on far-right forces, as recently evidenced in the fascist assassination of a former Maidan activist.

Under these conditions, not only Poroshenko but the entire Ukrainian ruling class see the whipping up of militarism, nationalist hysteria and the promotion of dictatorial rule as the only means to deal with mass social discontent.

The escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the introduction of martial law by Kiev have triggered a devaluation of the currencies and a fall on the stock markets of both countries. The value of the Ukrainian currency, the Hryvnia, fell, trading at 27.89 to the dollar on Tuesday, compared to 27.79 to the dollar on Monday. The National Bank of Ukraine has called upon the country's banks to guarantee cash supply at ATMs in an expected rise in demand because of the state of martial law. The value of several major Ukrainian companies also fell on the stock markets.

The Russian ruble experienced an even sharper devaluation, with the index of the Moscow stock market falling by 1.46 percent.

More details have since emerged about the stand-off on Sunday, suggesting that Ukraine consciously provoked some kind of response by Russia to use as a pretext for an escalation of the long-simmering military conflict.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), which fired at the ship on Sunday, released a transcript, according to which the Ukrainian vessels performed maneuvers in Russian territorial waters in the Azov Sea, staying in the waters for some 12 hours and refusing to leave upon the request of Russian authorities. The Ukrainian vessels, according to Russian officials, also entered waters that had been temporarily closed to navigation. In a

statement, the FSB argued that the Russian warships were forced to open fire because the three Ukrainian ships had ignored “legal demands to stop” and were “performing dangerous maneuvers.” Footage released by the FSB shows one of the Ukrainian vessels ramming a Russian warship.

The Kremlin has denounced the vessels’ maneuvers as “a dangerous provocation.” Ukraine insists that it had the right under international law to transit the strait and called Russia’s firing on its vessels an “act of aggression.”

On Monday, an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council took place. When the agenda proposed by Russia, including Ukraine’s violation of its borders, was voted down (only China, Kazakhstan, Bolivia and Russia voted for it, four abstained), the Russian representatives left the meeting. The UN Security Council instead adopted the agenda proposed by Ukraine.

The British ambassador to the UN denounced Russia’s refusal to participate in the meeting as “provocative.” The president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, condemned the use of force by Russia and insisted that it had to release the Ukrainian vessels. Tusk later met with Poroshenko to discuss the situation. Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative of Foreign Affairs, echoed Tusk’s statements, calling upon Russia “to immediately de-escalate the situation.”

The US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, said: “As President Trump has said many times, the United States would welcome a normal relationship with Russia. But outlaw actions like this one continue to make that impossible.” In reality, the US has helped ratchet up tensions in the region in recent months by supplying Ukraine with missiles and patrol boats, including ones to be used in the Azov Sea. Trump and Putin are set to meet later this week.

Behind the scenes, more open discussions about a military escalation are taking place among the strategists of US imperialism. In a publication by the Atlantic Council, a leading foreign policy think tank in Washington, Michael Carpenter, former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, urged the US to “respond immediately by giving Ukraine radars to boost its maritime domain awareness and land-based anti-ship missiles so it can defend its Azov Sea littoral.”

Taras Berezovets, a Ukrainian TV host and founder and CEO of Free Crimea, said: “The US should sanction Nord Stream 2. NATO should increase its military presence in the Black Sea to send a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ukraine should declare martial law, impose visa regime, and break the 2003 Azov Sea Treaty.” The Azov Sea

Treaty from 2003 regulates relations between Ukraine and Russia, dividing up both the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait between the two, and provides for a ban on foreign ships—including NATO—unless their passage is sanctioned by both countries.

Phillip Karber, who has worked for various US government agencies and now heads the Potomac Foundation, an American NGO that has close ties to the State Department, was even more explicit: “It’s time to spell it like it smells—it’s war!” He demanded “full wartime level of mobilization” in Ukraine; the re-equipment of the Ukrainian military “with modern Western military technology”; that NATO include Ukraine in the alliance, and that the US provide Ukraine “with the hardware needed to sustain a long-term competitive posture.”

The dangerous developments in the Black Sea region underscore the warnings of the ICFI of the danger of a Third World War. Neither the Putin regime, which is the outcome of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and fears the socialist mobilization of the Russian working class more than any assault by imperialism, nor any other section of the bourgeoisie can be relied upon to fend off the threat of war and dictatorship. Only an independent movement by the working class against capitalism and the nation-state system can put an end to the danger of another imperialist world war and nuclear annihilation.