

Russia has committed ‘crimes against humanity’ in Ukraine, Harris declares

The vice president cited numerous occurrences since Russia’s invasion began, saying that the evidence points to such a finding



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MUNICH — Vice President Harris said Saturday that the United States believes strongly that Russia has committed crimes against humanity and needs to be held to account for ghastly actions that have been described in intelligence reports and international headlines, including bombing a maternity hospital, forcibly relocating and “reeducating” Ukrainian children, and, just months ago, the suspected sexual assault of a 4-year-old girl.

“In the case of Russia’s actions in Ukraine, we have examined the evidence, we know the legal standards, and there is no doubt: These are crimes against humanity,” Harris said.

Speaking in moral terms nearly a year after Russia invaded Ukraine, Harris told diplomatic, intelligence and defense leaders gathered at the Munich Security Conference that the world has a humanitarian and strategic interest in continued support of the besieged nation, even as the White House has warned Kyiv that fissures and fatigue threaten its global support as the first anniversary of the conflict, Feb. 24, approaches.

Harris stressed that standing firm against Russian aggression sends a message to “other authoritarian powers that could seek to bend the world to their will through coercion, disinformation and even a brute force.”

Later, she added, “We have come together to stand for our common values and our common interests. And our common humanity.”

The designation is part of the administration’s commitment to pursuing legal accountability for Russian atrocities in Ukraine, said Rebecca Hamilton, professor of law at American University, Washington College of Law.

“To make a determination like this requires very deep engagement” at the State Department and beyond, she said. “Particularly as we hit the anniversary of this invasion, it helps send the signal out to the world — but most importantly, to victims — that the U.S. government hasn’t forgotten about what has happened, that it’s still paying attention.”

A day earlier, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, speaking by video link during the same high-profile time slot, asked that the gathered leaders “speed up” their support for Kyiv in its fight against Russia, warning that the larger nation had begun a spring offensive that needed to be blunted.

“We need to hurry up. We need speed — speed of our agreements, speed of our delivery ... speed of decisions to limit Russian potential. There is no alternative to speed because it is the speed that the life depends on,” Zelensky told the gathered leaders, to intermittent applause. Later, he said there was “no alternative to a Ukrainian victory.”

His country was granted candidate status in the European Union last year and has applied for accelerated entry into NATO — alliances that would mean more economic and military aid. But acceptance is a plodding process, and full membership in either organization could be years away.

While the Western alliance has held together over the past year, pumping weapons into Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia, there are early signs of fissures. In the United States, Republicans retook control of the House of Representatives in November, and many conservatives have vowed to pull back their support to Ukraine, warning against a blank check for Kyiv with no expiration date. At the same time, Europe’s long-term appetite for funding the war effort remains unclear, especially as leaders agonize over the conflict’s effects on the global economy.

Meanwhile, several polls show Americans’ support for Ukraine’s war has cooled. Forty-eight percent of Americans say they favor the United States’ providing weapons to Ukraine, according to an Associated Press/NORC poll released the day Harris landed in Europe. In May 2022, nearly three months into the war, 60 percent of U.S. adults said they were in favor of sending Ukraine weapons.

In her speech, Harris alluded to some of those fissures, speaking of an uneven road ahead.

“The daily agony of war will persist. The global ripple effects will continue by countries near and far, from Africa to Southeast Asia to the Caribbean,” she said.

But she said the United States remains committed to “this noble pursuit” of supporting Ukraine and pointed to the bipartisan U.S. delegation that came to the Munich Security Conference, the largest in the conference’s history.

In past weeks, the White House has quietly told Kyiv that it could soon see limits in support from the United States and other countries. And as the invasion’s anniversary neared, Harris has batted back criticism that support for Ukraine is weakening in the United States and elsewhere.

In an interview with NBC from Munich, she stressed that support for Ukraine’s effort remains high across the United States.

“You might be surprised to see where Ukrainian flags are flying in the United States. In all kinds of places. People who are wearing the colors or the ribbon. In all kinds of places,” she said. “So I feel a pretty good level of confidence, a high level of confidence, that the American people stand with the Ukrainian people, and that no matter the rhetoric, that we will have and keep a steady pace around the kind of support we’re giving.”

Her sentiments are likely to be echoed by President Biden, who travels to Europe on Monday to meet with foreign leaders and make a speech in Poland about the war effort.

Biden will “reaffirm the United States’ unwavering support for the security of the alliance,” White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters in the past week. The president will meet with leaders of the Bucharest Nine, a group of nations on NATO’s eastern flank, including the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Estonia, that was created after the Russian annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

The White House said Biden may hold additional meetings in Poland but has not said whether he would meet with Zelensky, who visited Washington in December. That trip was Zelensky’s first to a foreign country since the Russian invasion.

Harris said Saturday that she and the United States would continue to push for Russia to be held to account.

“I know firsthand the importance of gathering facts and holding them up against the law,” she said, alluding to her former jobs as a district attorney and then California’s attorney general.

David Bosco, an international studies professor at Indiana University Bloomington who studies the International Criminal Court, said allegations of crimes against humanity are pursued at a higher level than allegations of war crimes because they are regarded as systematic.

“You have to generally show that there’s some kind of organized plan,” he said, which usually involves investigating commanders or higher-ranking officials. But the chances of Ukraine or the International Criminal Court getting custody of top Russian figures are slim, he added.

Claire Parker contributed reporting from Washington.