

INSIDE: A UKRAINIAN FLAG TO DISPLAY

‘Undisguised terror’: Russia’s strike on key city chills Ukraine

The Associated Press

KHARKIV, Ukraine — In the dust, debris and the dead lying in Kharkiv’s central Freedom Square, Ukrainians on Tuesday saw what might become of other cities if isn’t countered in time.

Not long after sunrise, a Russian military strike hit the centre of Ukraine’s second-largest city, badly damaging its symbolic Soviet-era regional administration building. Closed-circuit television footage showed a fireball engulfing the street in front of the building, with a few cars rolling out of the billowing smoke.

“You cannot watch this without crying,” a witness said in a video of the aftermath and verified by the Associated Press.

An emergency official said the bodies of at least six people had been pulled from the ruins, and at least 20 other people were wounded. Two bodies lay side by side on the cobblestones near an abandoned car. One was barefoot and wrapped in a blanket. The other, in military-coloured clothing, had a clenched fist.

It wasn’t immediately clear what type of weapon was used or how many people were killed, but Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said there were

dozens of casualties.

Zelenskyy called the attack on the Freedom Square “frank, undisguised terror. Nobody will forgive. Nobody will forget. This attack on Kharkiv is a war crime.”

It was the first time the Russian military had hit the centre of the city of 1.5 million people whose residential neighbourhoods have been under shelling fire for days.

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> UVic prof gives online presentation about Ukraine crisis today, A3
> Russia escalates attacks, A8
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Pharmacies busy distributing free rapid tests for seniors



Pharmacy manager Megan St. John, right, gives a COVID-19 test kit to Susan Underwood at Fort Royal Pharmacy on Oak Bay Avenue. About 160 pharmacies on Vancouver Island were distributing the free kits on Tuesday. People age 70 and older are eligible to receive them; distribution will expand soon to more people. Story, A3 ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

B.C. Ferries being pulled back to government control



LES LEYNE

The language in a new bill that will govern B.C. Ferries is mostly the neutral legalese typical of all legislation.

But decoded into plain English (with a dose of translator’s discretion), it reads as a remarkably blunt power play aimed at jerking the quasi-independent corporation back under something close to direct government control.

The NDP government has stopped itself from just declaring the outfit a Crown corporation, which would be their first preference, if it wasn’t so expensive. Instead, it’s redesigned the lines of authority, based on a simmering mistrust of the corporation that persisted even after the NDP replaced some appointees of the previous government.

Most of the power will be stripped from the company’s board of directors and handed to a little-noticed oversight board, the B.C. Ferry Authority.

Politicians have been tinkering with the governance structure ever since the B.C. Liberals divested B.C. Ferries from government and set it up as publicly owned but privately managed corporation, “free from political interference.”

The change was driven by the lesson of the fast ferries fiasco, where NDP politicians of the 1990s made the call to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on three aluminum catamarans that were going to revolutionize the service. They didn’t work and had

to be abandoned (by the NDP government itself, it should be noted.)

The curious, confusing new structure held for a few years, but even the Liberals couldn’t resist meddling again when B.C. Ferries became controversial. The first-term NDP continued the tinkering by ordering fare freezes and service levels to meet popular demand. But the new bill goes far beyond that. The few brief sections neutralize the B.C. Ferries board of directors and give the final say on virtually everything to the one-step-removed B.C. Ferry Authority board.

Some of the changes are arcane, but send a clear message.

For example, current law says the corporation must provide to the authority any information it decides it needs. The new law adds “within the time period specified by the authority.”

In other words: “Give us whatever we want. And do it stat.”

The current law describes the B.C. Ferry Authority as the sole voting shareholder of the ferries corporation “and is to oversee the strategic direction in support of the public interest, including the public’s interest in safe, reliable and affordable coastal ferry services in British Columbia.”

Broad-brush, big picture oversight, in other words.

The new bill adds a few dramatic details. The authority board of directors will be able to pass resolutions that declare any aspect of the ferry service a public interest, then issue binding directions to B.C. Ferries (which is also known as B.C. Ferry Services or BCFS).

Just to be clear, “BCFS must comply with any direction issued ... ensure its business plan takes the resolution into account and ensure its annual report ... describes the actions BCFS took.”

To paraphrase the new instructions to B.C. Ferries: “When the authority says ‘jump,’ you not only jump, you report the jump publicly.”

Another example of the war games being played in this little governance adjustment: The bill states “a director of the BCFS is removed as, and ceases to be, a director on the passing of a resolution to that effect by the authority.”

In plain English, the authority can fire B.C. Ferries directors at will.

One clause in the bill zeroes in on the touchy topic of executive compensation. The current law gives the authority a detailed mandate to govern B.C. Ferries executive compensation, which tops out at more than a half-million dollars for veteran CEO Mark Collins. The new bill adds a requirement that the executive compensation plan be referred to the Public Sector Employers’ Council, an agency that coordinates compensation plans across the entire public sector.

It’s another level of regulation and scrutiny on how much the top earners at B.C. Ferries make, at a time when experienced marine executives are in short supply.

Subject to a full explanation, the first question about the new arrangement is: What’s the point of having two boards, when one will have all the power?

Taxpayers will wind up getting one real board for the price of two. And they don’t come cheap. The 11-member B.C. Ferries board and nine-member B.C. Ferry Authority board earn healthy stipends. It was weird before. It’s even weirder now.

Transportation Minister Rob Fleming’s bland introduction said it “will provide the tools for the B.C. Ferry Authority to best represent the public interest.”

There’s a lot more to it than that. lleyne@timescolonist.com



B.C. paid below market value for hotels for homeless

CARLA WILSON
Times Colonist

The price the province paid for nine Victoria and Vancouver properties purchased for social housing was below their total appraised market value, B.C.’s auditor general says.

Michael Pickup said Tuesday that B.C. Housing followed all the proper procedures when it bought the properties, many of them hotels, to shelter those without housing during the pandemic.

In releasing the audit of the expenditure, Pickup praised B.C. Housing for completing the transactions in a timely way during the challenging conditions of the pandemic. Properties were bought over a 13-month period in 2020 and 2021.

He had no recommendations, something that is rare following an audit.

Some people had questioned the purchases, fearing the province may have paid too much in its haste to find shelter for people without homes.

But Pickup said the audit found all of the approval requirements were met and certified, independent appraisals were obtained and the purchase total was below the total appraised market values for the nine properties.

B.C. moved to buy hotels and other properties after declaring a state of emergency in March 2020. Officials were concerned for the well-being of those living in Topaz Park and in tents along Johnson Street in Victoria and in Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver.

The audit covered only properties purchased by B.C. Housing using special provincial funding.

The nine properties the audit examined were bought with money approved by the province and drawn from its special account for housing priorities initiatives. Other purchases were not probed because their funds came out of B.C. Housing’s annual capital budget.

In 2020 and 2021, B.C. Housing paid \$403 million to buy properties for people who were unhoused or at risk of becoming homeless, Pickup’s report said.

Three levels of approval were required to line up funds for the nine sites. Treasury Board gave its approval. B.C. Housing’s board of commissioners vets purchases of more than \$35 million and approved purchase of two Vancouver properties above that level. Finally, B.C. Housing’s executive committee approved the purchases, along with the Provincial Rental Housing Corp.’s board of directors, which looked at each purchase individually.

Pickup said B.C. Housing carried out its due diligence, obtaining market value appraisals for the nine properties.

The total purchase price of \$202.4 million was below the total appraised market value of \$220 million for the nine properties. The final cost for all the properties was higher at \$221 million because it includes other costs, such as taxes and fees.

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Baked beans an easy main course with biscuits >Eric Akis, B6

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