

At 12.30 (11.30 am Italian time) the convoy of white SUVs with the blue writing "UN" leaves the last checkpoint towards the south, in the direction of Vasylivka, waiting for it there is a battered stretch of road that bears the signs of the living war, the only artery of the so-called gray zone, the no man's land. Neither Ukrainians nor Russians command them, there they command only the furious battle that daily rapes stretches of asphalt and pieces of life, that of the desolate bucolic villages now almost uninhabited. Beyond that checkpoint, the military in Kiev can do nothing, the safety of the 14 members of the IAEA commission and the UN escort personnel on their way to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the new ground zero of the conflict, is in the hands of fate. "We are aware of the situation on the ground, we know that military activities have intensified, even this morning - explains the director of Aiea and head of mission Rafael Grossi before setting off -. A few minutes ago I was updated by the Ukrainian military command on the risks, however we have come this far and we will not stop, we will go to the gray zone where the control of the Kiev forces ends to cross the first line where the territory controlled by the forces of occupation."

The departure is out of the question, especially after the day lost due to the permits denied (from Moscow), but not without fears and delays due to the intensification of the exchanges of fire that had already begun the night before. The Russians get the green light, the humanitarian mission starts, we with them. The more than twenty kilometers that separate Zaporizhzhia from the last checkpoint are traveled at high speed, the alternation of valleys and open spaces makes us an attractive moving target. When you reach Prymorska, the first roar arrives, followed by bursts of automatic rifles, then a second roar and so on with an almost regular cadence. From the clearing on the right black smoke rises, less and less hazy. "Tonight the group of Russian raiders trying to cross the contact line was identified," explains a soldier with his face covered in a military green balaclava. "There was a fire fight - he continues -, the enemies have fled but they are still in these parts, our men are chasing them. They had entered to sabotage the mission."

UN personnel remain on board the armored cars, we get out and find shelter behind the wall of a disused petrol station. The gusts are more and more insistent, but after a while they seem to slowly move away, the fighting moves west. The Ukrainian military again warns Grossi about the risk that the gray zone could turn into a trap in front of which the forces of Kiev can do nothing. While even further, beyond the front line in Russian territory, the unknown begins. Energodar itself, where the power plant stands on the east bank of the Dnypro River, is a seamless battlefield. While Grossi was preparing to leave at dawn, the Ukrainians accused the Russian forces of bombing the town where the plant is located with helicopters, cannons and multi-launch missile systems. On time the accusation was rebounded by the Russians who claimed that it was the Ukrainian army that fired artillery against the meeting point fixed with the IAEA mission near the town of Vasylivka, 68 kilometers east of the nuclear power plant. "Four cannon shells exploded 400 meters from the first reactor" of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, reported the Moscow Defense Ministry. According to which in reality it was Ukrainian saboteurs who crossed the border with the intention of blowing up the mission.

"Wish us good luck," says director Grossi, breaking the delay and ordering the convoy to continue. "We proceed even though we are aware that the risks are very, very high. However, we have the necessary reassurance, let's go on." The cars get back on the road, the blue flag of the United Nations on the leading car greets, touching it, the yellow and blue flag of Ukraine fixed on the reinforced concrete hut of the last check-point. The soldiers on cover carefully observe the surrounding plateaus for endless moments, the column of cars proceeds at a brisk pace, disappearing on the horizon. In the background the usual war symphony which, like a broken truce, seems to approach again, it's time for us to go too, but in the opposite direction to the UN, running towards the safety zone where Grossi has promised that he will return with a

victory in hand, the entry into the new ground zero of this conflict, the nuclear power plant. Meanwhile, the war continues not only with artillery shots, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zackarova, points the finger at the West on the issue of visas denied to Russians. "The EU is committed to an important decision: whether or not to issue visas to the Russians. But radiation doesn't need a visa to cross borders. If something happens in Zaporozhzhia, it won't be visas, passports or borders ". Yesterday, however, there is only one protagonist, "the nuclear mission." At dusk the UN convoy, in reduced form, reappears in Ukrainian territory, on board is Grossi along with some officials, including the Italian engineer Massimo Aparo. "First of all, I want to tell you that we entered the plant and started work," the head of mission says satisfied, who reports that "the physical integrity of the plant has been violated several times, either by accident or intentionally. And this is no longer accepted. "How long will the technicians stay in Energodar?" A first group will remain until Sunday or Monday, then we will create a continuous presence in the plant, a permanent task force with the aim of ensuring that nothing One thing is certain, the IAEA is now inside, and it won't move from there."