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Ukraine Says Russia 'Ruined' Returned Ships

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Moscow said the ships had illegally entered its territorial waters. **Sergei Malgavko / TASS**

Ukrainian naval ships, captured by Russia last November and released on Tuesday to be returned to Ukraine, are in very poor condition and cannot move independently, the commander of Ukraine's navy said on Wednesday.

Russia seized three ships in the Kerch Strait last year after opening fire on them and wounding several sailors. Moscow said the ships — two small Ukrainian armoured artillery vessels and a tug boat — had illegally entered its territorial waters. Kiev denied that.

The dispute has caused friction between Moscow and the West, which has backed the Ukrainian position that the ships should not have been held. The Kerch Strait, which separates mainland Russia from Crimea, is the only outlet from the Azov Sea, where Ukraine has major cities and ports, and Ukraine says it cannot be denied access.

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Ukrainian navy chief Vice Admiral Ihor Voronchenko told Ukrainian television's '4th channel' the ships had not yet reached Ukrainian territorial waters because they were being towed so slowly.

"They do not go on their own. The Russians ruined them — even took off lamps, power outlets and toilets. We will show the whole world the Russian barbarism towards them."

President Volodymyr Zelenskiy is due to greet the ships in the port of Ochakiv in the southern Mykolayiv region.

Moscow returned the sailors who had been on board the ships to Ukraine in September as part of a prisoner exchange.

The release of the ships took place ahead of a four-way peace summit on eastern Ukraine set for Dec. 9 in Paris. The leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine will meet in an attempt to advance efforts for a peaceful resolution to the conflict that has killed more than 13,000 people in five years.

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