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Refugees Flee Fresh Fighting Around Kyiv

By AFP

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Victor Kovalchuk / UNIAN

Dozens of people fled a surge in fighting on Thursday in a flashpoint area where Ukraine said it had pushed back Russian forces around Kyiv, AFP journalists reported.

Heavy exchanges of shelling could be heard from the commuter town of Irpin on the northwestern outskirts of Kyiv, and plumes of black smoke rose into the air, an AFP team at the scene said.

Residents said homes had been set on fire during intensified violence on Thursday, forcing out people who had managed to remain in war-torn Irpin until now.

Shells trailing smoke also set fire to a warehouse near residential buildings just west of the capital as civilians took cover behind a supermarket, AFP journalists said.

Mayor Vitali Klitschko said on Wednesday that "almost all of Irpin is already under the control

of Ukrainian soldiers" after battles with Russian troops.

"The houses are destroyed, there are only basements left," entrepreneur Leonid Markevych, 55, told AFP after fleeing from his house just outside Irpin.

"Every morning, every day, every evening, the Russians go on the offensive and every day our boys push them back. So we have heavy shelling every day and night."

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Emergency vehicles brought people out of Irpin to a reception center, where police checked their bags and papers before loading them onto yellow evacuation buses.

Children were among those who left the town, while people brought whatever they could carry with them, including family pets.

Irpin has witnessed some of the heaviest fighting of the war, and many of its inhabitants had already fled across a bridge that Ukrainian forces blew up to stop the Russian advance.

Russian troops quickly pushed to the outskirts of Kyiv after the invasion but their attempt to encircle and enter the city have failed.

Ukraine says it is mounting a counter-offensive in areas around Kyiv.

According to Klitschko, in addition to most of Irpin, Ukrainian forces have also taken control of the small city of Makariv some 50 kilometers to the west.

The former boxer said Wednesday, "We would rather die than kneel in front of the Russians or surrender to the invaders."

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