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Russia Says 265 Azovstal Defenders Surrendered

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Russian Defense Ministry

Russia said Tuesday that 265 Ukrainian soldiers holed up in Mariupol's besieged Azovstal steel plant had "surrendered," contradicting Kyiv's account that the evacuated soldiers would be exchanged later.

The fate of the fighters is now uncertain, with Ukraine calling for an immediate prisoner swap and Russian lawmakers calling for them to be criminally prosecuted.

"The surrender of fighters from the Azov nationalist unit and Ukrainian servicemen blocked in the Azovstal plant in Mariupol began yesterday," the Russian Defense Ministry said in a daily briefing.

Russia's military said 265 fighters, 51 of whom were seriously wounded, "laid down their arms."

Those in need of medical assistance were sent to a hospital in the town of Novoazovsk, which

is controlled by pro-Russia separatists, it added.

Ukraine's defense ministry said Monday the fighters had been evacuated through humanitarian corridors to areas under Russian and Moscow-backed separatists' control and that a further "exchange procedure" would take place later.

But shortly after the Russian Defense Ministry's statement, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, ordered lawmakers to draft a standing order prohibiting the exchange of Azovstal troops for Russian prisoners of war.

"Nazi criminals should not be subject to exchange. They are war criminals and we must do everything to bring them to justice," Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin was quoted as saying.

Russia has been waging what it dubs a "special military operation" in Ukraine with the aim of "de-Nazifying" its pro-Western neighbor, which Moscow falsely asserts is led by neo-Nazis.

Leonid Slutsky, chair of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, called for an exception to Russia's moratorium on the death penalty so that the evacuated Azovstal fighters — who he described as "Nazi beasts" — could be executed if found guilty of war crimes.

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On Tuesday, Ukraine's defense ministry said a rescue mission to extract the last of the estimated 340 remaining Azovstal defenders was underway.

"Our state is taking all necessary rescue measures," the ministry said in a Telegram message.

It credited the defenders of Azovstal for delaying the transfer of 20,000 Russian troops to other parts of Ukraine, preventing Moscow from quickly capturing the southern city of Zaporizhzhia and allowing Ukrainian forces to regroup.

The general staff of Ukraine's armed forces said earlier Tuesday that the mission to defend Azovstal is over, effectively ceding control of Mariupol to Moscow and opening a land corridor between annexed Crimea and mainland Russia.

Mariupol has suffered some of the war's most brutal shelling since Russian troops encircled it in the early days of the invasion.

AFP contributed reporting.

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