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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Says 1,000 Azovstal Defenders Have Surrendered This Week

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A separatist DNR serviceman (R) watches a Ukrainian serviceman board a bus during the evacuation from the besieged Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol. **ALESSANDRO GUERRA / EPA / TASS**

Russia said Wednesday that another 694 Ukrainian soldiers defending Mariupol's Azovstal steel plant have surrendered over the past 24 hours as Kyiv's effort to retain its last holdout in the devastated southern port comes to a close.

They join the 265 soldiers that Russia's Defense Ministry said had surrendered earlier, bringing the total to 959 in 48 hours.

The second group of Azovstal defenders includes 29 wounded, joining the 51 seriously wounded soldiers who were part of the first evacuation.

The fate of the Ukrainian soldiers remains unclear, with high-ranking officials in Moscow deploying increasingly violent rhetoric despite the Kremlin's promise to treat them "in accordance with international standards."

Ukraine has not acknowledged the soldiers' surrender and says they will be swapped for Russian prisoners of war at a later date.

But Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, ordered lawmakers Tuesday to draft a standing order prohibiting the exchange of Azovstal troops for Russian prisoners of war.

Senior lawmaker Leonid Slutsky, who chairs the Duma's International Relations Committee, called for an exception to the death penalty moratorium to execute the troops, who he called "Nazi beasts."

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Russia's Justice Ministry petitioned the Supreme Court to declare the Azov regiment — which originated as a far-right unit in 2014 and was mostly stationed in Mariupol at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine — a terrorist organization, opening up the possibility of prosecuting the evacuated fighters.

Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it plans to interrogate the surrendered soldiers without indicating whether they would be treated as suspects.

"Russian investigators will identify the nationalists, check their involvement in crimes against civilians and compare the obtained information with other available data in criminal case files," it said Tuesday.

The leader of the Moscow-backed separatist Donetsk People's Republic said later Wednesday that the fate of those soldiers would be determined by a court, Reuters reported, citing local media.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said Tuesday evening that "influential mediators" were involved in what Kyiv calls an evacuation of the soldiers.

Ukraine's military effectively ceded control of Mariupol to Russia with an announcement Tuesday that the mission to defend Azovstal was over.

An undisclosed number of troops still remains inside the sprawling steel factory.

Mariupol, a key land corridor between annexed Crimea and mainland Russia, has suffered some of the war's most brutal shelling since its encirclement in the early days of Russia's invasion.

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