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Russia Says Mariupol Battle At End as Ukrainian Defenders Surrender

By Charlotte Plantive for AFP and Dmitry Zaks for AFP

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The Azovstal defenders are now being taken to Russia. **TASS**

Russia has declared victory in its months-long operation to capture the strategic port of Mariupol after Ukraine ordered the last of its troops holed up in the city's Azovstal steelworks to lay down their arms.

Moscow's flattening of Mariupol has drawn multiple accusations of war crimes, including over a deadly attack on a maternity ward, and Ukraine has begun a legal reckoning for captured Russian troops.

The first post-invasion trial of a Russian soldier for war crimes neared its climax in Kyiv on Friday, after 21-year-old sergeant Vadim Shishimarin admitted to killing an unarmed civilian early in the offensive. The verdict is due Monday.

Shishimarin told the court he was "truly sorry." But his lawyer said in closing arguments that

the young soldier was "not guilty" of premeditated murder and war crimes.

Since Ukrainian forces fended off the Russian offensive around Kyiv both eastern Ukraine and Mariupol in the south have borne the brunt of a remorseless ground and artillery attack.

The fighting is fiercest in the eastern region of Donbas, a Russian-speaking area that has been partially controlled by pro-Kremlin separatists since 2014.

"Attempts to attack Donbas continue. They completely ruined Rubizhne, Vonokvakha, just as Mariupol," President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his nightly video address late Friday, adding the Russians were "trying to do the same with Severodonetsk and many other cities."

In the eastern city of Severodonetsk, 12 people were killed and another 40 wounded by Russian shelling, the regional governor said.

Zelensky described the bombardment of Severodonetsk as "brutal and absolutely pointless," as residents cowering in basements described an unending ordeal of terror.

The city forms part of the last pocket of Ukrainian resistance in Lugansk, which along with the neighboring region of Donetsk comprises the Donbas war zone.

Moscow on Friday said the battle for the Azovstal steelworks — a symbol of Ukraine's dogged resistance since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the invasion on Feb. 24 — was now over.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenko said 2,439 Ukrainian personnel had surrendered at the steelworks since May 16, the final 500 on Friday.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu had informed Putin of "the end of the operation and the complete liberation of the (Azovstal) industrial complex and the city of Mariupol," Konashenko added.

Ukraine hopes to exchange the surrendering Azovstal soldiers for Russian prisoners. But in Donetsk, pro-Kremlin authorities are threatening to put some of them on trial.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said all prisoners of war should "be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention and the law of war."

President Joe Biden has cast the Ukraine war as part of a U.S.-led struggle pitting democracy against authoritarianism.

The US Congress this week approved a $40-billion (38-billion-euro) aid package, including funds to enhance Ukraine's armored vehicle fleet and air defense system.

And meeting in Germany, G7 industrialized nations pledged $19.8 billion to shore up Ukraine's shattered public finances.

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