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Russia Slams 'Provocations,' 'Fakes' in Deadly Ukraine Mall Strike

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This handout picture taken and released by the Ukraine's State Emergency Service on June 28 shows rescuers working in the wreckage of a mall in Kremenchuk, the day after it was hit by a Russian missile strike, according to Ukrainian authorities. **AFP Photo / Ukrainian State Emergency Service Press Service**

Russia has shirked blame for Monday's deadly missile strike on a central Ukrainian shopping mall that killed at least 20 people and injured dozens, calling accusations that it targeted civilians "fake" and a "provocation."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has said the attack in the city of Kremenchuk, which took place while some 1,000 civilians were inside the mall, was "one of the most brazen terrorist acts in European history." Leaders of the G7 group of industrialized nations condemned the strike as a "war crime."

But Moscow, which has regularly denied claims that it has targeted Ukrainian civilians during its four-month invasion, said it did not aim at the mall and cast doubt on whether the shopping center was even open.

The Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement Tuesday that it carried out a targeted strike on a stockpile of Western weapons which then detonated and started a fire at "a non-operating shopping center" next door.

The weapons, according to the Defense Ministry, had been sent to Ukraine from the U.S. and Europe and were destroyed in its air strike. It did not make any mention of civilian casualties.

The Kremlin backed the Defense Ministry's statement, with spokeman Dmitry Peskov telling reporters Tuesday that the military's account of the incident had been "comprehensive."

Related article: At Least 18 Killed in Russian Missile Strike on Ukrainian Shopping Mall

Without providing evidence, Russia's deputy representative to the UN Dmitry Polyansky said there were "many striking discrepancies" and that the attack looked like "a new Bucha-style Ukrainian provocation," referring to mass atrocities against civilians in a Kyiv suburb.

Russia rejects claims that its army was behind the killings of civilians in Bucha in March, suggesting that the footage of dead bodies apparently executed in the streets was staged by Kyiv.

Polyansky added that the shopping mall incident is "exactly" what Kyiv "needs to keep the focus of attention on Ukraine" ahead of this week's NATO summit.

Footage from Monday's strike shows the mall engulfed in flames, with dozens of rescuers looking for people who may have been trapped in the building by the blaze.

Zelensky said that although many shoppers evacuated the busy shopping center after the air raid siren sounded, some shoppers and workers remained inside when the missile hit.

Russian state-run media outlets doubled down on the claims made by Moscow officials about the attack.

During the state-run Channel One broadcaster's Tuesday afternoon news segment, an anchor alleged that "the [shopping] center was closed a long time ago."

"So the statements from Kyiv about the multitude of people are nothing more than lies. Also, Western media journalists quickly appeared on the spot, which once again makes us wonder about the possibility of this being a provocation," the anchor said.

He added that footage of evenly standing counters and shelves inside the mall "confirms precisely the [Defense Ministry's] information about the fire, and all statements from Kyiv are nothing more than a continuation of a wave of fakes."

Other versions questioning Kyiv's version of events appeared online.

One pro-Kremlin Telegram channel called "War on Fakes" claimed Monday evening, citing unnamed sources, that the building was used as a warehouse for military equipment.

“Zelensky said that there were about a thousand civilians in the shopping center, however, the parking lot in front of the shopping center is almost empty, and there are few cars,” it said.

Survivors of the attack have recounted to local and international media how they were in the middle of ordinary working or shopping days at the time of the strike — and how they thought they were safe in Kremenchuk, which is far from the epicenter of the war.

“And then I remember myself flying,” one survivor, Lyudmila Mykhailets, told The New York Times.

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