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150 Siberian Soldiers Refuse Ukraine Deployment, Activist Says

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A Buryat serviceman during a Victory Day military parade marking the 73rd anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in Ulan-Ude, republic of Buryatia, on May 9, 2018. **Andrei Ogorodnik/TASS**

Around 150 soldiers from a Siberian region with one of the highest military death tolls in the Ukraine war have refused deployment, a prominent activist has said.

The men returned home to the republic of Buryatia over the weekend after their wives pleaded for their return in a rare video appeal last month, according to Alexandra Garmazhapova, who heads the anti-war Free Buryatia Foundation.

"You made the right choice: you saved your lives and the lives of others!" Garmazhapova wrote in a Facebook post Monday, addressing the soldiers who had refused service.

The activist previously said Buryat soldiers terminated their military contracts in June, prompting their wives to film a video appeal calling for their husbands' return.

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Garmazhapova told the independent Mediazona news website that the video initially had the reverse effect.

“After the wives appealed, the bus with the men who were on their way home was turned around,” she said.

“They were sent back to occupied territory in Ukraine and left there for another 10 days.”

The soldiers had reportedly been threatened with lawsuits for their refusals.

A total of 500 Buryat soldiers have refused military service through the Free Buryatia Foundation since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of its western neighbor Ukraine in February, Garmazhapova estimated.

Buryatia, one of Russia’s most impoverished regions, has the highest officially confirmed number of casualties in the invasion.

Open-source data collected by the independent investigative outlet iStories has verified the deaths of more than 200 Buryat soldiers out of nearly 4,500 Russians killed in Ukraine.

The Russian government hasn't updated its official death toll in Ukraine since March, when it reported 1,351 soldiers killed.

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