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‘We Need to Get Out of Here’: Fear Grips Annexed Crimea After Airbase Attack

By James Beardsworth

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Smoke rises after an explosion near the village of Novofedorivka in the Crimea. **Mulch / TASS**

An apparent Ukrainian attack on a military air base in Russia-controlled Crimea sent people running for cover from a series of powerful blasts, causing shock among locals and tourists at the height of the holiday season.

Towering plumes of black smoke were seen rising from the Saki air base in western Crimea on Tuesday afternoon, clearly visible from nearby packed beaches.

“There were about 15 explosions. It lasted around 30-40 minutes. Many vacationers were trying to find shelter — some people were hiding behind the trees, children were crying. People were trying to stick together,” said Ksenia Korkina, a Russian visitor to Crimea who witnessed the explosions from a couple of kilometers away.

If proven to be a Ukrainian attack, it will be the first major Ukrainian strike on Crimea —

annexed by Moscow in 2014 — since the start of Russia's six-month invasion of Ukraine. It is likely to seriously disrupt life on the peninsula, a popular tourism destination thought of until now as safe from the fighting, and bring the war closer to many ordinary Russians.

The explosions killed one person and injured 14 others, according to Sergei Aksyonov, the Russian-appointed head of Crimea.

"The very first explosion was very powerful and strong. The walls and windows were shaking. The sound was deafening and scary," Korkina told The Moscow Times.

Videos published to social media showed Russian holidaymakers gathering their belongings and fleeing the beach after the initial blasts.

"Mum let's go, we need to get out of here," one distressed onlooker can be heard shouting.

Satellite imagery and alleged videos from the explosion's aftermath showed the burned-out remains of a Russian military aircraft as well as rows of charred civilian cars.

Ukraine did not openly admit that it was behind the blasts, but The New York Times quoted an anonymous Ukrainian military official Tuesday as taking responsibility. Russia's Defense Ministry claimed the explosions were the result of an accident.

Tourism is an important part of the Crimean economy and the peak vacation season has already been damaged by the closure of civilian airports near the Ukrainian border amid ongoing fighting to the north.

Tuesday's attack is likely to dissuade even more people from visiting Crimea.

"My friends tell me every day that the territory is disputed and it's better to stay away from the [Russia-Ukraine] border," Russian blogger Diana, who was vacationing 10 kilometers away from the airbase at the time of the explosion, told The Moscow Times.

The panic sowed by the blasts apparently even prompted some tourists to leave the region, with videos posted to social media appearing to show traffic jams on road approaching the bridge that links the peninsula to the Russian mainland.

"Some tourists went home. There was a big traffic jam near Novofedorivka," Korkina said. "Many people were afraid to go out after the explosions. I was afraid as well."

Exacerbating civilians' fears is the lingering uncertainty over how Ukraine was apparently able to carry out such an attack on a target almost 200 kilometers from the front line.

Russia has significant air defense systems in Crimea around the nearby city of Yevpatoriya and should have been able to fend off a long-range missile attack, according to Konrad Muzyka, an independent military analyst at the Polish-based Rochan Consulting.

"If it was a large missile you would expect the Russians to have tried to strike it down, but we have seen no missile trails in the sky and no evidence that air defense near Yevpatoria was activated," Muzyka told The Moscow Times. "So perhaps this was something smaller, like a loitering munition or unmanned aerial vehicle."

A Ukrainian official cited by Reuters on Wednesday suggested that the explosions could have been caused by partisan saboteurs inside Crimea.

The attack comes as Ukraine is expected to attempt to launch a counteroffensive against Russian forces in the south of the country.

In his nightly address Tuesday, Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zelensky did not mention the Saki air base but said that Kyiv would press on to reclaim Crimea.

"This Russian war against Ukraine and against the entire free Europe began with Crimea and must end with Crimea — with its liberation," he said.

While the most significant attack on Crimea to date, the airbase strikes are not the only time targets in the peninsula have been hit in recent months.

Russia's Navy Day celebrations in the Crimean port city of Sevastopol last month were canceled following what appeared to be a drone attack on the Russian Black Sea Fleet's headquarters.

Speaking at the time, a spokesperson for the Ukrainian military, Natalia Gumenyuk, did not confirm Ukrainian involvement but said Kyiv was targeting Russian military facilities inside Ukraine – and that Crimea was part of Ukraine.

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