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Visual Investigation Details Captive Russian Troops' Deaths By Shooting

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Still from video

The New York Times said Sunday it has verified footage showing captive Russian troops being killed by Ukrainian forces as experts remain divided on whether the grisly episode constitutes a war crime or an act of self-defense.

At least four drone and cellphone videos of the incident emerged between Nov. 12-17 as Ukraine recaptured the village of Makiivka in eastern Ukraine's Luhansk region.

One edited video filmed by a Ukrainian soldier shows three of his comrades standing by in a farmyard as 10 apparently unarmed Russian soldiers lie facedown on the ground.

Two of six soldiers lying on the ground can be seen moving earlier in the video before the footage is cut off; when it resumes, four others are filmed exiting a shed and lying head down next to the six soldiers already on the ground.

"They're considered hors de combat, or noncombatants — effectively prisoners of war," Dr.

Rohini Haar, medical adviser at Physicians for Human Rights, told NYT.

An 11th soldier is then shown emerging from the same shed and opening fire at Ukrainian soldiers.

He is shot back in response on the spot, according to the NYT's breakdown of the video.

A drone video shows the bloody aftermath of the incident, with most of the Russian soldiers positioned as they were when they surrendered in the cellphone video.

Iva Vukusic, a war crimes prosecution expert at Utrecht University, said classifying the encounter as a war crime comes down to whether the Russian soldiers were shot in the heat of the moment or as an act of revenge.

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Additionally, while the 10 lying soldiers are considered noncombatants, the actions of the 11th soldier could also be considered a war crime for feigning surrender or non-combatant status.

"It may very well be that, had this guy not fired, that they all would have been captured as P.O.W.s, and survived," Vukusic told NYT.

Russian military and civilian authorities, as well as influential state media figures and military bloggers, jumped to accuse their Ukrainian counterparts of committing war crimes.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Friday the videos showed the "deliberate and methodical murder" of its soldiers. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova condemned the "merciless" and "shocking" shooting.

Russian investigative authorities have opened a criminal probe into the footage, while the recently reshuffled presidential human rights council said it would raise the issue with international organizations.

The Kremlin on Monday vowed that Russia would find and punish the Ukrainian soldiers involved in the episode.

The UN Human Rights Office said it is looking into the videos.

Ukrainian Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets denied that Kyiv's forces had killed Russian prisoners of war, arguing that Ukraine's soldiers were defending themselves against Russians who feigned surrender.

This means the soldiers "cannot be considered prisoners of war," he argued.

The UN's human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine said last week that prisoners of war on both sides claimed they were tortured in captivity.

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