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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Pro-Kremlin Crowds in Russia Mourn Soldiers Killed in Ukraine Strike

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Mourners gather to lay flowers in Samara on January 3, 2023. **Arden Arkman / AFP**

Pro-government Russians came out onto the streets of towns across Samara region Tuesday to mourn local soldiers killed in the Ukrainian city of Makiivka in a missile attack on New Year's Eve.

Hundreds of pro-war Russians attended gatherings in the Volga river cities of Samara and Tolyatti, according to local media reports.

"I haven't slept for 3 days, and Samara hasn't slept... this is very difficult and scary, But we can't be broken," said female activist Yekaterina Kolotovkina in a speech to those who assembled in Samara, according to a video posted online.

The Russian Ministry of Defense said Monday that 63 soldiers were killed in a Ukrainian strike on a vocational school being used as a temporary barracks in Makiivka, making the attack one of the deadliest single incidents of the war so far.

But some fear the death toll could be even higher with pro-war bloggers suggesting the real total could be several hundred and the Ukrainian Armed Forces estimating 400 fatalities.

Embed:

The demonstrations in Samara, Tolyatti and other towns in the region were a rare public show of Russian grief and anger over the human toll of the invasion of Ukraine.

However, attendees appeared to come from pro-government groups, with lots of flags from pro-Kremlin groups visible in photos, including those from the ruling United Russia party.

Some 200 people laid roses and wreaths in a central square in the city of Samara — where some of the servicemen came from — as an Orthodox priest recited a prayer.

Soldiers also fired a gun salute at the commemoration.

Russia has not officially released any details about those killed in Makiivka, but they are believed to be men drafted as part of the country's "partial" mobilization drive.

The governor of Russia's Samara region said Monday that mobilized soldiers from Samara were among those killed.

"Grief unites us," Kolotovkina, who is the wife of a Russian general, told the assembled men and women.

Related article: 63 Russian Soldiers Killed in Ukrainian Missile Strike on Makiivka — Defense Ministry

"Together, we will destroy the enemy. We haven't been given a choice. Neither us nor our husbands wanted war. But the West closed ranks against us," she said, news outlet RBC reported.

The deaths of the Russian servicemen in Makiivka has sparked heavy online criticism in Russia of the army's senior command, including from pro-war and nationalist commentators.

There have been reports that the soldiers were quartered next to a munitions depot which exploded in the strike and that some had been able to use their Russian mobile phones — giving away their location to Ukrainian forces.

"What conclusions will be drawn? Who will be punished?" Mikhail Matveyev, a member of the Russian parliament representing Samara, wrote on social media.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the strike was carried out by Himars rocket systems supplied to Ukraine by the United States.

The Ukrainian authorities said Tuesday that, in a separate incident over New Year, over 500 Russian soldiers were killed and wounded in the occupied Kherson region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has yet to react to the Makiivka attack, or reports of deaths in Kherson region, which come during a holiday season before Orthodox Christmas which many Russians spend with their families.

AFP contributed reporting

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