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Death Toll From Ukrainian Strike on Makiivka Rises to 89

By AFP

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The aftermath of the Ukrainian rocket strike in Makiivka. **AP**

The death toll from a Ukrainian New Year strike in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine has risen to 89, Moscow said on Wednesday, after Russians gathered to mourn the troops in a rare public display of anger and grief.

The Russian Defense Ministry announced the recovery of further bodies from the rubble of a vocational school in the town of Makiivka in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine and that the death toll had risen from 63 to 89.

The Defense Ministry said that the tragedy had occurred because Russian troops had used their cell phones, giving away their location to Ukrainian forces.

Russia had said on Monday that 63 troops had been killed, the biggest loss of life from a single strike reported by Moscow since the start of the invasion in February.

"The number of our dead comrades has gone up to 89," Lieutenant General Sergei Sevryukov said in a video statement released by the Defense Ministry early on Wednesday. More bodies had been found under the rubble, he added.

Ukraine struck a temporary base in Makiivka at 12:01 am local time on January 1, using U.S.-supplied HIMARS rocket systems, Sevryukov said.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin had just delivered his traditional New Year's address. The Kremlin chief hailed "our heroes" fighting in Ukraine and declared that "historical rightness is on our side."

Ukraine has taken responsibility for the strike and said the toll could be much higher. Russian war correspondents said many of the victims were reservists recently mobilized into the army.

The admission of the heavy losses came after the war correspondents, who have gained influence in recent months, accused Russia's top commanders of fatal incompetence.

"Currently, a commission is working to investigate the circumstances of what has happened," Sevryukov said on Wednesday.

"But it is already obvious that the main reason for what has happened was the turning on and massive use by personnel of mobile phones within reach of enemy weapons contrary to the ban."

He said measures were being taken to ensure such incidents would not happen in the future, and that all those responsible would be punished.

The new announcement came after mourners gathered in several cities of the Volga region of Samara — where some of the servicemen came from — to mourn the dead.

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