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'Heavy, Bloody Battles' in Ukraine's Soledar – Wagner Boss

By AFP

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Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. **Alexei Smagin / Kommersant**

Russian mercenary group Wagner said on Tuesday it was fighting "heavy, bloody battles" for control of the town of Soledar as part of Russia's months-long offensive to capture Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region.

"On the western outskirts of Soledar there are heavy bloody battles. The Armed Forces of Ukraine are honorably defending the territory of Soledar," Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin said on social media.

The Kremlin-linked businessman, who has been hit with Western sanctions, also dismissed allegations that Ukrainian forces were deserting the front lines en masse in Soledar.

"Let's be honest with ourselves. The Ukrainian army is bravely fighting for Bakhmut and Soledar. Reports of their mass desertion are not true," Prigozhin said, cited by his press office

on Telegram.

Soledar is around 15 kilometers (nine miles) from the war-battered city of Bakhmut, which has become the focus of fighting in recent months.

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The capture of Bakhmut — a city with a pre-war population of 70,000 — is now one of Moscow's main military objectives almost a year into its Ukraine mission.

A Russian proxy official in Donetsk, Denis Pushilin, said on Tuesday on Russian state television that Soledar was "very close to liberation" by Moscow's forces.

He admitted that this came "at a very high price" and said Ukrainian forces were "still resisting."

Prigozhin said earlier this week that Soledar was being stormed "exclusively" by Wagner units, saying they were fighting fiercely for the city's administration building.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his late-night address on Monday that his troops were withstanding "new and even tougher assaults" on Soledar.

He said the town had been flattened by the fighting. "Everything is completely destroyed."

The U.K.'s defense ministry said on Monday that Moscow's forces were "likely in control of most" of Soledar.

Prigozhin and Wagner's public persona has vastly grown since the Kremlin sent troops into Ukraine.

The businessman has recruited prisoners to fight in Ukraine, promising amnesty upon their return if they survive.

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