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Russian Military Claims 'Liberation' of Eastern Ukraine's Soledar

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Smoke raises after shelling in Soledar, Donetsk region, Ukraine. **LIBKOS / AP / TASS**

Russia's Defense Ministry said Friday that the country's Armed Forces had captured eastern Ukraine's salt-mining town of Soledar, some 48 hours after the victory was claimed by the head of Russia's mercenary company Wagner.

The capture of Soledar is a key objective for the Russian military in a larger campaign to take control of the strategic Donetsk region city of Bakhmut 15 kilometers to the southwest, where fierce battles have been raging for months.

If true, the town's capture would mark Russia's first significant success on the battlefield in months following a sweeping Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south and east last fall.

"The liberation of Soledar was completed on the evening of Jan. 12, which is important for the continuation of successful offensive operations in the Donetsk direction," the military said in a daily briefing.

The Defense Ministry said the capture of Soledar will cut off supply lines for the remaining Ukrainian troops in Bakhmut and allow for their encirclement.

The Defense Ministry credited its aviation, missile and airborne forces for the assault, which it said killed 700 Ukrainian troops and 300 weapons in three days.

Kyiv denied that Russia was in control of Soledar, saying heavy fighting was ongoing.

"Severe fighting is going on in Soledar," said Serhiy Cherevaty, a spokesman for the eastern group of the Ukrainian armed forces. "Ukraine's armed forces have the situation under control in difficult conditions."

President Volodymyr Zelensky said Thursday night that Ukrainian forces defending Bakhmut and Soledar would be armed with everything they need to keep Russian troops at bay in some of the bloodiest battles of the nearly 11-month war.

But Ukrainian presidential adviser Oleksiy Arestovych said “it won’t be an escape but a planned decision by the command” if Kyiv’s forces decide to retreat from Soledar.

On Wednesday, Wagner founder and Kremlin-linked tycoon Yevgeny Prigozhin had claimed that his forces captured Soledar without the Armed Forces’ involvement.

Hours later, the Russian military appointed General Valery Gerasimov to lead Russia’s troops in Ukraine, replacing alleged Prigozhin ally Sergei Surovikin in the role.

Underscoring the rift between Wagner and the military, Prigozhin on Friday named “infighting, corruption, bureaucracy and officials clinging to their seats” as a “significant” threat to Wagner's existence.

“They constantly try to steal victory from Wagner PMC and try to belittle its merits,” he said through his company, Concord, in a response to an unrelated media inquiry.

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