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Moscow-Backed Officials Say They Visited Destroyed Soledar

By AFP

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Denis Pushilin and Zurab Makiev in Soledar. **denis-pushilin.ru**

A Russian proxy official in east Ukraine has claimed to have visited Soledar, the flattened town in the Donetsk region of Ukraine that Moscow said it captured this month.

Denis Pushilin, Moscow's top official responsible for Donetsk, said late Sunday he had visited the destroyed salt mining town with Zurab Makiev, a member of Russia's parliament.

Pushilin posted video on social media showing the men armed and wearing military attire arriving by car to Soledar. AFP could not independently verify the images.

They were the first Moscow-linked officials to claim to visit the town, whose capture Russia has portrayed as a major victory.

Pushilin told Russian state television Monday after the visit that Soledar had been "destroyed" and that there were "almost no whole buildings left."

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The Defense Ministry has said that the town's capture is an important step to pushing out Ukrainian troops from Bakhmut, a larger mining town nearby.

Pushilin said that fighting in Bakhmut was "intensifying" and claimed Russian troops were advancing and that mercenaries were controlling strategic heights near Bakhmut.

"The situation remains quite difficult, but our units are advancing almost everywhere," he said.

During his tour of Soledar on Sunday, video showed Pushilin was accompanied by fighters from the Russian mercenary group Wagner.

Wagner said it played the lead in the offensive for Soledar.

Pushilin's footage showed burnt-out apartment blocks and ruined industrial buildings and the sound of artillery fire could be heard in the background.

Pushilin said there were some civilians left in Soledar and claimed they were receiving aid from Wagner fighters.

"There are very few residents left. They are supported with everything necessary by Wagner fighters," Pushilin said.

"There are still civilians who do not want to leave," he said, without specifying how many.

The Moscow-backed separatist leader said Wagner fighters told the officials "how bloody the battles were."

"We fought for every house," one fighter in the video said.

Russia claimed control of Soledar on Jan. 13. It lies outside the key city of Bakhmut, which Moscow's forces have been trying to capture for months.

Ukraine has not formally announced the withdrawal of its forces from Soledar.

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