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Russian Defense Minister Visits Destroyed Ukrainian City Mariupol

By AFP

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Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (C) in Mariupol. **Russian Defense Ministry**

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has visited the war-battered city of Mariupol in southern Ukraine, his ministry announced Monday, one year after his forces besieged the city, leveling it to the ground.

His visit comes as Russian forces are closing in on Bakhmut, a city in eastern Ukraine that has become the stage of the longest-running battle of Russia's intervention in Ukraine.

The ministry said Shoigu, one of the highest-ranking officials to visit east Ukraine, had toured the destroyed port city to oversee reconstruction efforts.

Shoigu "inspected work carried out by the... Defense Ministry to restore infrastructure in Donbas," the ministry said, without specifying the timing of the visit.

He visited a medical center built by the military, a dispatch center of the emergency situations

ministry as well as a newly constructed district with a dozen five-story residential buildings.

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> Минобороны России отчиталось о поездке Сергея Шойгу в оккупированный Мариуполь
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Russia launched a scorched-earth campaign against Mariupol at the start of its campaign last year, destroying the Azovstal steel works, which was the last holdout of Ukraine forces in the city.

Investigative teams linked to jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny have reported that Defense Ministry officials are profiting personally from reconstruction efforts in Mariupol.

The ministry's announcement comes one day after it said Shoigu had met with Russian soldiers deployed to a "command post in" eastern Ukraine.

Russia's grueling effort to capture Bakhmut has been spearheaded on the ground by the Russian mercenary group Wagner.

Its founder, Kremlin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, routinely criticizes the Defense Ministry in social media videos allegedly filmed from the front.

Analysts say that even though Bakhmut is one of the bloodiest battles of the war, any capture of the salt-mining city by Russia would offer Moscow little additional strategic advantage in Donbas.

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