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Wagner Says Ready to Defend Russia's Border Region

By AFP

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Lev Borodin/TASS

The head of Russia's Wagner mercenary group said Saturday that he was ready to send fighters to the Russian Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine and has come under intense shelling.

Thousands have fled villages in southwestern Belgorod after days of attacks that came after an armed incursion from Ukraine.

Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin has been embroiled in a public spat with Russia's regular army and has accused Moscow's military leadership of being unable to defend Belgorod.

"If the defense ministry, in the near future, does not stop what is happening in the Belgorod region.. then of course we will come to defend Russian land," Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of Wagner, said on Telegram.

"The civilian population is dying in Belgorod," Prigozhin said, adding he would not wait for an "invitation" to deploy his fighters there.

Prigozhin has said that his fighters have mostly left the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut that Wagner said it captured last month in the longest and bloodiest battle of the conflict.

Belgorod governor Vyacheslav Gladkov, said that the region had been hit by 500 attacks on Friday — including artillery and rocket fire.

He said five people had died in the shelling.

The town of Shebekino has been most affected, with hundreds of its residents fleeing.

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