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Ukrainian Prisoners Tortured, Forced to Dig Russian Trenches – AP

July 13, 2023



Russian security agents seen detaining a Ukrainian citizen. **Russian Federal Security Service**

Thousands of Ukrainian civilians held by Russian forces are tortured and forced to dig trenches for the military, the Associated Press reported Thursday, citing dozens of former detainees, Ukrainian officials and satellite imagery.

The report describes a system of detention and abuse of civilians — most without legal status under Russian law — that the AP said stands in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions.

"It's a business of human trafficking," said Lena Yahupova, a 50-year-old Zaporizhzhia region city administrator who was detained in October and managed to escape from captivity in March.

Yahupova described being regularly forced to dig trenches with other Ukrainians — including business owners, utility workers, a student and a teacher — for over 12 hours at a time. Most prisoners wore Russian military uniforms, leading to fears that Ukrainian artillery might mistake them for enemy troops.

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The AP said it documented two locations using satellite imagery where Ukrainian prisoners were forced to dig defensive trenches for Russian forces in anticipation of Ukraine's counteroffensive.

Russian soldiers also forced prisoners to dig mass graves for their executed compatriots who disobeyed orders, according to people interviewed and satellite images.

Ukraine's government believes Russia may have detained approximately 10,000 civilians, Oleksandr Kononenko, a prisoner exchange negotiator, told the AP.

Detainees are arbitrarily moved across facilities in what one relative described as an effort to conceal them from family members and "just to hide the traces of crimes."

Russia denies holding Ukrainian civilians in captivity.

But Kyiv said in June that Russia had freed approximately 150 Ukrainian civilians while denying others were being held, according to the AP.

Related article: Russia Executed 77 Civilian Detainees in Ukraine – UN

A June 27 United Nations report documented at least 53 exchanges of civilian prisoners for Russian soldiers — a violation of international law.

The UN report also documented 77 executions of civilian captives and said 91% of prisoners described torture and ill-treatment.

The AP's report mapped 103 makeshift and formal detention facilities where Ukrainian civilians are held in Russia, Belarus and occupied Ukraine.

Almost 100 photos provided by Ukrainian investigators from inside these facilities in liberated territories showed torture instruments that captive civilians described being subjected to in Russia and occupied regions.

Russian authorities plan to build 31 new prison colonies and detention centers in occupied territories by 2026, the AP reported, citing a Russian government document it had obtained.

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