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6 Ukrainian Children Returned From Russia Under Qatari Deal

By AFP

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Children from the DNR, LNR and Zaporizhzhya region in Moscow. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

Six Ukrainian children taken by Russia in the wake of Moscow's invasion are to be reunited with their families after Qatari mediation, officials from the Gulf state said Tuesday.

Russia has been accused of forcibly deporting thousands of Ukrainian children from schools, hospitals and orphanages in parts of the country controlled by its forces.

The children, aged between eight and 15, are the second group of minors to be returned via Qatar's Embassy in Moscow through a Doha-mediated deal between Russia and Ukraine which saw four returned in October.

Qatar had facilitated "the reunification of six additional Ukrainian children with their families in time for the festive holidays," said Lolwah Al-Khater, Minister of State for International

Cooperation.

"Both sides cooperated fully and engaged in good faith throughout the process, with Qatar serving as an intermediary," she added.

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Among the latest group is an 11-year-old boy whose mother, a Ukrainian soldier, is still being held in Russia. He has been handed into the custody of his aunt and is on his way to Ukraine via Moscow.

Another, an eight-year-old boy, had been with his grandmother in eastern Ukraine since March 2022, with Qatar negotiating a reunion with his mother in Russian-occupied Luhansk before the pair traveled on to Moscow.

All families have traveled together along the same route to Kyiv, via Moscow and Minsk with Qatari diplomats accompanying the children to the Ukrainian border where they will be received by Ukrainian authorities.

Ukraine has said some 20,000 children were taken to Russia in the wake of Moscow's February 2022 invasion. Fewer than 400 have been returned.

Moscow has denied forcibly taking thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia, but has said they were moved for their own safety if they were without parental care.

Khater said the Qatari mediation had come "in response to requests from Russia and Ukraine to identify and explore potential areas of cooperation, with the aim of establishing foundations of trust between the two sides."

Qatar has been at the center of a series of high-profile negotiations and hostage exchanges in recent months, most notably mediating talks between Israel and Hamas for the release of scores of hostages and a seven-day ceasefire in Gaza which ended on Friday.

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