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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Unprecedented Cross-Border Strikes Rattle Russia's Belgorod

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Flowers and stuffed animals covered in snow at a makeshift memorial to victims of recent shelling attacks in Belgorod. **MT**

BELGOROD, Russia — Flashes illuminate the night sky, quickly followed by loud bangs. As air defense systems shoot down incoming rockets and sirens sound through the city, two girls rush to the train station. One of them is in tears.

"Sasha, calm down!" the other girl reassures her.

"You'll tell them everything," the girls' taxi driver tells them as he drops them off at the station, where they are catching a train to Moscow. "In Moscow, they don't know what's going on here."

Local authorities will report three seriously wounded civilians in Monday's rocket attack on Belgorod, the capital of the Russian region of the same name that sits on Ukraine's border.

In the nearly two years since launching its war on Ukraine, the Kremlin has worked to insulate ordinary Russians from the effects of the conflict. But in Belgorod, a city of 350,000 just 30 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, near-daily Ukrainian shelling over the past 10 days has made the war all but inescapable.

The latest wave of air raids came as a response to a unprecedented Russian aerial attack on Dec. 29 that killed over 60 civilians across Ukraine, the most devastating since the start of Moscow's full-scale invasion.

The next day, shelling hit Belgorod's city center, claiming at least 25 lives and injuring over 100. This attack, the deadliest on Russian soil since the start of the war, shocked residents after months of relative calm.

"At times we even managed to ignore what was going on there [in Ukraine], and then suddenly..." says Agrifina, 31, before trailing off.

The local businesswoman recently attended the funeral of her friend Alexandra, 30, who was killed in the attack.

Agrifina recounts how Alexandra was burned alive in her car. It took hours for her body to be identified, and she was laid to rest in a closed casket.

"I couldn't see her and say goodbye," Agrifina says.

Since the Dec. 30 shelling, the city has been living in a state of shock and anxiety. Due to the high risk of an attack, authorities called off all New Year celebrations, including the traditional Orthodox Christmas Eve masses on Jan. 6.

On Sunday afternoon, Orthodox Christmas, the city streets were eerily empty.

"Usually, January is fully booked for us," says Sasha, 24, a waiter in a restaurant at the intersection where a shell hit on Dec. 30. Only one customer occupies a table.

"People are still in shock and mourning," Sasha observes.

Just a few days earlier, she witnessed a loud blast, and then saw burning cars and corpses in front of the restaurant. People all around were running for their lives looking for shelter. Sasha says she offered assistance to victims who sought refuge in the restaurant.

Stay or go

Across the street, workers are repairing the façade of a shop damaged by shelling.

"If it happens again, I will pack up and leave," says Daniil, 22, a shop worker who just resigned and found a new remote job that he says will give him the flexibility to leave the city if needed.

Zoya, 62, a pensioner who lives higher up in the same building, is supervising the repair of her windows which were shattered in the explosion.

"I am not going anywhere, no one is going anywhere," she says defiantly. "I hope everything

will be fine."

The Belgorod region has been within firing range of Ukrainian rocket launchers since the fall of 2022, when Kyiv's forces recaptured most of the neighboring Kharkiv region from Russian forces, moving the front line just 40 kilometers away from Belgorod city.

Airstrikes and shelling have since become a regular occurrence in the region's border areas. Shebekino, a town six kilometers from the border, was almost fully evacuated in June 2023 amid intensified shelling at the start of Kyiv's summer counteroffensive and cross-border raids by pro-Ukrainian Russian saboteurs.

Now, there's concern that Belgorod could face a similar fate.

On Jan. 5, local authorities said they would evacuate all residents who wished to do so. As of Monday, over 300 people have opted to relocate to temporary accommodation in other towns in the region.

Due to the constant risk of rocket attacks, school holidays have been extended until Jan. 19. On Monday, Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said the administration received about 1,300 applications to send children to school camps in other Russian regions. As of Wednesday, 93 children have been evacuated to the neighboring Voronezh region, according to Gladkov.

'You never feel calm or safe'

Many residents have already sought refuge with relatives and friends in other parts of Russia.

"My psyche couldn't handle this anymore," says Anna, 31, a housewife who fled from Belgorod a few days ago and asked to change her name due to safety concerns.

Anna, who has been taking sedatives for months to cope with the stress of shelling, says she thinks Russians living elsewhere can hardly understand what it is like to live in Belgorod now.

"You never feel calm or safe," she says. "You feel like running but you don't know where to."

She recalls taking shelter with her five-year-old son in her basement during the shelling of Jan. 2, which killed one resident and injured 11 others.

"You are just screaming out of fear and hopelessness, praying that a shell won't hit your house," she reflects. It was then that she decided to leave.

She and her son are now staying with a friend in Moscow while her husband stays in Belgorod to work. She doesn't know when she will be able to come back.

"Ideally, it would be best to start a new life in another city," Anna says. "I have little faith there will be any improvement in [Belgorod]."

Officials' response

Over 800 apartments have been damaged in the latest shelling, according to official figures. The authorities have pledged to complete the repairs by the end of the month.

Residents largely express appreciation for the regional administration's proactive response to the crisis, particularly Gladkov's hands-on approach. He has personally overseen repair works and communicates with citizens via his Telegram channel.

"I have never witnessed such humanity from the government," remarks Agrifina. "He is doing everything he can to make people feel better in this situation."

Ukrainian authorities have not commented on the attacks carried out on Russian territory, following their longstanding policy of neither confirming nor denying involvement in cross-border fire.

The Kremlin has labeled the Dec. 30 attack an act of terrorism, accusing the West of sharing the blame for its military support to Kyiv.

Since the start of the year, Russian forces have intensified their air strikes on Ukrainian cities in what officials say is an effort to wear down Kyiv's air defenses as the frontline has remained stagnant for months.

"America and Europe: they are all fascists!" says Oleg Nikolaevich, 62, a local pensioner who found an unexploded shell in his garden a few days earlier. The whole neighborhood had to be temporarily evacuated following his discovery.

"If that thing had gone off, there would be nothing left," he said, pointing at his house.

Creeping fatigue

Despite the dangers, Oleg says he has no intention to leave the city. He says he hopes Russia will win the war now that the West's support in Ukraine appears to be dwindling.

"We just need to finish them off [Kyiv's armed forces] before they'll do the same with us," he says.

Zoya, the pensioner whose windows were broken, agrees.

"I really hope they'll send that Ukrainian elite to hell so that we can live with the Ukrainian people as normal," Zoya says.

Even though Belgorod continues to pay a high price for Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, criticism of the invasion remains rare.

"If we didn't start it, they would have," says Oleg, repeating the Russian propaganda narrative that claims without evidence that Kyiv, with NATO's backing, was plotting an attack on Russia before Moscow's February 2022 offensive.

But while only a few feel comfortable openly sharing their political views, most don't hide their fatigue with the war.

"You want to believe that the people in power are intelligent, that things [the war in Ukraine] are being done for some reason," Agrifina says. "But then when you see the consequences of that — people dying — you don't want that."

“Let all this finish as soon as possible,” Anna echoes.

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