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Russia Says Kyiv Shot Down Plane Carrying Ukrainian POWs

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The crash site of the IL-76 transport aircraft. **TASS**

Russia on Wednesday blamed Kyiv for shooting down a military transportation aircraft said to be carrying 65 Ukrainian soldiers for a prisoner exchange

The Il-76 aircraft crashed Wednesday morning in western Russia's Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine, during a "scheduled flight," the Russian Defense Ministry said, with authorities later stating that everyone on board the plane had perished.

"There were 65 captured servicemen of the [Ukrainian Armed Forces], six crew members and three escorts," the Defense Ministry said.

It claimed Ukrainian forces stationed in the Kharkiv region, located across the border from Belgorod, had fired two missiles at the transport aircraft and described the incident as a "terrorist act."

Related article: What Do We Know About the Il-76 Crash in Belgorod?

The plane was said to have crashed near the town of Yablonovo, less than 50 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.

Belgorod region Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov joined investigators and emergency crews at the crash site, where he confirmed everyone on board the airplane had died.

Gladkov had announced a rocket attack alert around an hour before the Il-76 crash.

When asked about Wednesday's air disaster by journalists, the Kremlin said it could not comment.

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The Moscow Times, analyzing video of the crash shared on social media, was able to establish that the military plane was flying away from the border with Ukraine when it crashed.

The independent news outlet iStories, citing Ukrainian open-source investigators, claimed the Il-76 had flown over Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Red Sea and Iran before disappearing from radars, only to later reappear again over Russia's Belgorod region.

It was not immediately possible to verify that report.

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Anonymous sources within Ukraine's Armed Forces told the news outlet Ukrainska Pravda that the plane crash in the Belgorod region was "their job," claiming that the Russian Il-76 was carrying S-300 anti-aircraft missiles.

The Moscow Times could not independently verify either claims by Russian authorities or the Ukrainska Pravda report.

Russian lawmaker Andrei Kartapolov, who heads the lower-house State Duma's Defense Committee, claimed the Il-76 aircraft was "downed by three rockets... either [U.S.-made] Patriot [missiles] or German-made Iris-T [missiles]."

"Ukraine's leadership was well aware of preparations for the [prisoner] exchange, was informed about how the prisoners would be sent," Kartapolov said.

The lawmaker added that a second Russian military aircraft carrying 80 Ukrainian prisoners of war had been flying behind the downed Il-76 plane but was turned back following Wednesday's crash.

"Now we can't talk about an exchange," Kartapolov said of the remaining prisoners of war.

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State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said he had instructed Russia's parliament to send a formal address to the U.S. Congress and Germany's Bundestag over the incident.

“The lawmakers of these countries need to recognize their responsibility, what all of this is leading to,” he said.

Later on Wednesday, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-funded broadcaster RT, published a list of 65 names she said were Ukrainian prisoners of war on board the ill-fated flight.

The Telegram news channel Ostorozhno Novosti said most of the names were that of rank-and-file Ukrainian soldiers who had been captured by Russian troops in 2023 and 2022.

Some of the names matched those of Ukrainian prisoners of war approved for an exchange last year but who still remained in Russia as of December, according to a Ukrainian Telegram channel that searches for captured and missing soldiers.

AFP contributed reporting.

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