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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Says Captured Key Mining Town of Toretsk in East Ukraine

By Daria Andriievska for AFP

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This photograph shows multi-apartment buildings destroyed by air-strikes in the town of Toretsk, Donetsk region, on July 29, 2024. **Anatolii STEPANOV / AFP**

Russia said Friday its forces had seized the mining town of Toretsk in east Ukraine after months of heavy fighting, allowing Moscow to push further into the Donbas region.

Kyiv denied Russia had full control of the industrial hub.

The Kremlin has been steadily grinding forward on the battlefield for over a year, capturing dozens of mostly abandoned towns and villages despite heavy material and human losses.

The capture of Toretsk, which lies on elevated ground, would allow Moscow to further obstruct Ukrainian military supply routes, paving the way for it to advance in the northern part of the Donetsk region, according to military analysts.

It is the biggest settlement that Moscow claims to have captured since Avdiivka in late

February 2024, almost a year ago.

"As a result of active offensive operations... the city of Dzerzhinsk in the Donetsk People's Republic was liberated," Moscow's Defense Ministry said, using a Russian name for the town and the region.

But a press officer for Ukraine's 28th brigade, which has been fighting for control of Toretsk, said Ukrainian forces were holding their positions on the town's outskirts.

Once a bustling coal mining center, Toretsk has been decimated by fighting which has intensified since last summer.

It had a population of about 30,000 before Russia's invasion in 2022, but by July last year the number of residents had fallen by 90%, according to the local administration.

'Do we need negotiations?'

Russian military bloggers welcomed the news, hailing Toretsk as a major stepping stone towards capturing the rest of the Donetsk region — a stated goal of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Excuse me, but do we need negotiations at this rate?" Russian military correspondent Alexander Kots said, referring to potential ceasefire talks between Putin and new U.S. President Donald Trump.

Related article: Russia Says Advancing Towards Flashpoint Ukrainian City

Putin has made capturing the Donbas region a "priority" since declaring it Russian territory in 2022.

Toretsk and the embattled town of Chasiv Yar less than 20 kilometers (12 miles) further north are two of the last remaining urban areas blocking Russia from advancing further into the region, according to Russian military bloggers.

Moscow's army is likely to leverage the capture of Toretsk to advance quickly into open fields west of the town, the Institute for the Study of War said in a report last month.

'It's just ruins'

AFP reporters visited Toretsk last July.

At the time only a fraction of the original population remained — mostly pensioners unable or unwilling to leave, despite the daily bombardment and electricity and water being cut off.

The doors of houses could be seen smashed in, windows shattered, trees charred and electricity poles bent by a blast.

Drone video footage recently published by Ukrainian journalists shot over Toretsk shows the skeletal ruins of a small town subjected to eight months of systematic Russian shelling.

Smoke can be seen rising from the snow-blanketed remains of Soviet-era buildings that once lined the streets, but which have been reduced to piles of rubble.

Shortly before Russia's announcement on Friday, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry posted an image of destroyed buildings on social media platform X.

"This was once someone's home," it said. "A place where people lived, laughed, and built their future. Now, it's just ruins."

It did not comment on whether the town had fallen under Russia's control.

'Enemy attack'

Fighting in the nearly three-year war has shown no signs of de-escalating despite Trump's promise to end fighting within "24 hours" once in power.

Russian strikes on the Ukrainian border region of Sumy overnight killed three people who were pulled from the rubble of a two-story residential building, prosecutors said Friday.

The attack ripped a hole dividing two sections of a Soviet-era building, official images showed.

On the other side of the border, in Russia's Kursk region, local residents have grown increasingly angry with the authorities in Kursk about the fate of hundreds of Russians trapped by a major ground assault Ukraine launched last August.

Kyiv said Thursday it was ready to open a humanitarian corridor to let Russian citizens in the border area leave, if Moscow requested one.

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