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Russia Strikes Kyiv After First Stage of Major Prisoner Swap

By Florent Vergnes for AFP

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Russian overnight attack on Kyiv **https://kyiv.npu.gov.ua**

A massive Russian drone and missile attack on Kyiv Saturday wounded at least 15 people, just as Russia and Ukraine were in the middle of a major prisoner swap.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched 14 ballistic missiles and 250 attack drones overnight, adding that it downed six missiles and 245 drones.

Kyiv was "the main target of the enemy attack", the air force said in a statement.

"With each such attack, the world becomes more certain that the cause of prolonging the war lies in Moscow," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on X.

"Only additional sanctions targeting key sectors of the Russian economy will force Moscow to cease fire," he said.

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Kyiv city officials reported fires and fallen debris in several parts of the Ukrainian capital, after AFP journalists heard explosions overnight.

The police said 15 people were injured in Kyiv itself and two more in the surrounding region.

Officials said five civilians were killed by Russian strikes in the Kharkiv and Donetsk regions.

The Russian military meanwhile said Ukraine had targeted it with 788 drones and missiles since Tuesday.

Dozens of drones targeting Moscow have been shot down over the past week.

The attack on Kyiv came hours after Russia and Ukraine completed the first stage of a prisoner exchange agreed at talks last week in Istanbul which, if completed, would be the biggest swap since the start of the conflict.

Both sides received 390 people in the first stage and are expected to exchange 1,000 each in total.

Russia has signalled it will send Ukraine its terms for a peace settlement after the swap, which is set to continue over the weekend – without saying what those terms would be.

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'First stage'

The two enemies have held regular prisoner swaps since Russia launched its 2022 offensive – but none have been on this scale.

An AFP reporter saw some of the formerly captive Ukrainian soldiers arrive at a hospital in the northern Chernihiv region, emaciated but smiling and waving to crowds waiting outside.

After they stepped off the bus, tearful relatives rushed to embrace the soldiers while others held pictures of their loved ones, hoping to find out if they had been seen in captivity.

Many of the soldiers were draped in bright yellow and blue Ukrainian flags.

"The first stage of the '1,000-for-1,000' exchange agreement has been carried out," Zelensky said.

Russia said it had received 270 Russian troops and 120 civilians, including some from parts of its Kursk region captured and held by Kyiv for months.

The two sides have not yet revealed the identities of those exchanged.

U.S. President Donald Trump earlier congratulated the two countries for the swap.

"This could lead to something big???" he wrote on his Truth Social platform.

Trump's efforts to broker a ceasefire in Europe's biggest conflict since World War II have so far been unsuccessful, despite his pledge to rapidly end the fighting.

One of the soldiers formerly held captive, 58-year-old Viktor Syvak, told AFP it was hard to put words to his emotional homecoming.

Captured in the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, he had been held for 37 months and 12 days.

"I didn't expect such a welcome. It's impossible to describe. I can't put it into words. It's very joyful," he said.

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Diplomatic push

After more than three years of fighting, thousands of POWs are held in both countries.

Russia is believed to have the larger share, with the number of Ukrainian captives held by Moscow estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000.

Diplomatic efforts to end the conflict have stepped up a gear in recent weeks, but the Kremlin has shown no sign it has walked back its maximalist demands for ending the fighting.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has defied European pressure for a full and unconditional truce in Ukraine, pressing on with its offensive, which has left tens of thousands dead.

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