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# North Korea Acknowledges Its Troops Cleared Mines for Russia

By Claire Lee for AFP

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**SONG KYONG-SEOK / POOL / TASS**

North Korea sent troops to clear mines in Russia's Kursk region earlier this year, leader Kim Jong Un said in a speech carried on Saturday by state media, a rare acknowledgement by Pyongyang of the deadly tasks assigned to its deployed soldiers.

North Korea has sent thousands of troops to support Russia's nearly four-year invasion of Ukraine, according to South Korean and Western intelligence agencies.

Analysts say Russia is giving North Korea financial aid, military technology, food and energy supplies in return, allowing the diplomatically isolated nation to sidestep tough international sanctions on its nuclear and missile programs.

Hailing the return of an engineering regiment, Kim noted that they wrote "letters to their hometowns and villages at breaks of the mine-clearing hours," according to the Korean

Central News Agency (KCNA).

Nine members of the regiment died during the 120-day deployment that started in August, Kim said in his speech at a welcome ceremony on Friday, KCNA reported.

He awarded the deceased state honors to "add eternal luster" to their bravery.

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"All of you, both officers and soldiers, displayed mass heroism overcoming unimaginable mental and physical burdens almost every day," Kim said.

The troops had been able to "work a miracle of turning a vast ... danger zone into a safe and secure one in a matter of less than three months."

Images released by KCNA showed a smiling Kim embracing returned soldiers, some of whom appeared injured and in wheelchairs, at the ceremony in Pyongyang on Friday.

One of them looked visibly emotional as Kim held his head and hand while he sat in a wheelchair in a military uniform.

Other images showed Kim consoling families of the deceased and kneeling before a portrait of a fallen soldier to pay his respects, placing what appeared to be medals and flowers beside images of the dead.

The North Korean leader also mentioned the "pain of waiting for one hundred and twenty days in which he had never forgotten the beloved sons even for a moment."

## Killed in combat

In September, Kim appeared alongside China's Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at an elaborate military parade in Beijing.

Kim did not respond to an offer from Donald Trump to meet during the U.S. President's Asia trip in October.

North Korea only confirmed in April that it had deployed troops to support Russia and that its soldiers had been killed in combat.

At a previous ceremony in August, images released by KCNA showed an emotional Kim embracing a returned solider who appeared overwhelmed, burying his face in the leader's chest.

In early July, state media showed a visibly emotional Kim honoring flag-draped coffins, apparently of the deceased soldiers returning home.

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