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Ukraine Fires Wave of Drones at Russia on Last Day of Key Economic Forum

By AFP

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Eyewitness footage of a fire caused by a drone strike in the Leningrad region. **Astra / Telegram**

Ukraine fired hundreds of drones at Russia early Saturday, leaving one person dead and setting an oil depot ablaze on the final day of the country's flagship economic forum in St. Petersburg, officials said.

Many of the drones targeted St. Petersburg itself, the second Ukrainian attack on the city in less than a week, with Ukraine's SBU security service saying it had hit a naval base.

Moscow and Kyiv have intensified drone strikes on each other in recent months as U.S.-led diplomatic efforts to end the war, now in its fifth year, remain stalled and sidetracked by the war in the Middle East.

The strikes come a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky's proposal for a meeting, drawing criticism from Zelensky, who accused

him of "choosing war again."

Russian air defenses intercepted a total of 376 drones over the regions of "Belgorod, Bryansk, Kaluga, Kursk, Leningrad, Novgorod, Oryol, Pskov, Rostov, Ryazan, Smolensk, Tver and Tula, the Moscow region, the republic of Crimea, the republic of Abkhazia, and over the waters of the Azov and Black Seas," the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, while Abkhazia is a region of Georgia that Russia military occupies.

Over 140 drones were shot down over the Leningrad region, which surrounds St. Petersburg, Governor Alexander Drozdenko said.

The city's Governor, Alexander Beglov, issued a rare call for residents to stay indoors during the attack.

"Russian air defenses prevented any damage. The condition of the three injured is assessed as minor and they have been discharged," he said.

Ukraine's SBU security service said it had targeted the city's Kronstadt naval base, as well as "the Russian Navy's 15th Arsenal in the Leningrad region."

The attacks also sparked a fire at an oil depot in the southern town of Ust-Labinsk, while drone debris killed a man in the western Tver region, according to local officials.

Zelensky described the strikes as a "just response" to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

"It is time to end this war. But Russia's ruler wants to keep fighting. That is why Ukrainian sanctions against this aggression are working," he said on X.

"Any manifestation of injustice against Ukraine will receive a just response."

'Choosing war again'

The attacks come a day after Putin rejected a meeting with Zelensky.

Speaking at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) — an event dubbed "Russia's Davos" — Putin said he saw "no point" in meeting the Ukrainian leader until a possible peace deal had been agreed.

Zelensky hit back, saying the Russian leader was "weak" and "choosing war again."

On Saturday, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha heaped further criticism on the Russian leader.

"Putin lost his chance to get out of his failed war," he said.

"Russia will still have to accept a diplomatic solution but the terms will be far worse."

Hundreds of thousands have been killed since Putin launched his full-scale invasion — which he calls a "special military operation" — in February 2022.

Swathes of eastern and southern Ukraine have been destroyed and millions forced from their homes in the four-year campaign Moscow hoped would have toppled Kyiv within a matter of days.

Russia renewed its strikes on Ukraine early Saturday.

A Russian drone killed a 64-year-old man in the southern Mykolaiv region, while a strike on the nearby Zaporizhzhia region wounded a 10-year-old boy and his father, regional authorities said.

Russian drone and artillery attacks in Ukraine's central Dnipropetrovsk region killed one person and left three others wounded, regional Governor Oleksandr Ganzha wrote on Telegram.

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