

Russia accused of taking thousands of Ukrainians hostage

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KYIV, Ukraine ([NewsNation](#)) — In addition to war crimes, Russia is now accused of forcibly taking thousands of Ukrainians to Russia. According to one Ukraine official, as many as 402,000 people, including 84,000 children, have been taken “hostage.”

A senior U.S. defense official says Russia’s military advance on Ukraine’s capital of Kyiv appears to have halted as it turns its focus toward control of Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region.

Maria Shuvalova, a professor who has stayed in Kyiv with her family during the war, told NewsNation she can tell the difference. Air raid sirens have been less frequent, and they have not happened at night in a couple of days, allowing her family to sleep.

“We always feel when Russian forces are regrouping because it’s our chance to have some rest,” she said on “NewsNation Prime.”

As shelling intensifies, families have moved underground, living in subways below the eastern city of Kharkiv. Some have been there since the war started, only leaving to get fresh air to let their dog out.

Yet even underground the war isn’t far. Kharkiv has been under siege by Russian forces since the start of the invasion with relentless shelling.

In the latest attack, Ukraine’s government said shelling on a group of people awaiting aid in Kharkiv killed six people on Thursday. It was not immediately possible to verify the allegation.

About half of the city’s population of 1.4 million has left, and food and other essentials are dwindling for those who stay behind.

Mariupol’s city council believes that based on eyewitness reports “about 300” people died in the Russian attack on a theater being used in the city as a bomb shelter on March 16.

It was not immediately clear whether emergency workers had finished excavating the site or how the eyewitnesses arrived at the death toll.

When the theater was struck, an enormous inscription reading “CHILDREN” was posted outside in Russian, intended to be visible from the skies above.

Soon after the airstrike, Ludmyla Denisova, the Ukrainian Parliament’s human rights commissioner, said more than 1,300 people had been sheltering in the building.

Mariupol’s government said Friday that the Kremlin’s main political party has opened a political office in a shopping mall on the outskirts of the besieged city.

According to the post on the city’s Telegram channel, the United Russia office is distributing promotional materials as well as mobile phone cards for an operator that functions in the nearby Russia-backed separatist regions.

Mariupol’s communication links have been all but severed since the siege began in early March. Cellphone, television and radio towers have been targeted in Russian airstrikes and artillery barrages.

Ukraine’s Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk announced the country hopes to open a safe corridor to evacuate civilians from the besieged city of Mariupol in private vehicles.

Repeated attempts to arrange safe passage out of the southern port city, which is surrounded by Russian forces, have failed.

Mariupol, which is normally home to about 400,000 people, has been under heavy bombardment for weeks. Civilians trapped there have been sheltering in basements with little food, power or running water.

Those who manage to leave Mariupol will find buses awaiting in the nearby city of Berdiansk which will take them to the city of Zaporizhzhia, Vereshchuk said.

“We will do everything in our power so that buses filled with Mariupol residents reach Zaporizhzhia today,” Vereshchuk said.

A senior Ukrainian official has said that 7,331 people were evacuated from cities Friday through humanitarian corridors.

A total of 2,717 people left Mariupol Thursday, Vereshchuk said in an online post at the time.

President Joe Biden announced a new deal meant to reduce Europe’s reliance on Russian energy Friday. Top officials characterized the step as the start of a years-long initiative to further isolate Moscow after its invasion of Ukraine.

Biden asserted that Russian President Vladimir Putin uses energy to “coerce and manipulate his neighbors” and uses the profits from its sale to “drive his war machine.”

Biden said the partnership, announced jointly with a top European Union official, will turn that dynamic on its head by reducing Europe’s dependence on Russian energy sources, as well as the continent’s demand for gas overall.

Under the plan, the U.S. and other nations will increase liquefied natural gas exports to Europe by 15 billion cubic meters this year. Even larger shipments would be delivered in the future.

At the same time, they will try to keep their climate goals on track by powering gas infrastructure with clean energy and reducing methane leaks that can worsen global warming.

Experts NewsNation spoke to believe there are still plenty of sanctions Biden and NATO allies could impose on Russia, specifically targeting Putin's energy sector.

"The EU is still buying billions of dollars of energy products from Russia every single week. There's a lot more we can do that's within our own control," said Dan Katz, co-founder and portfolio manager at Amberwave.

During Biden's trip to Poland, he gave U.S. troops stationed near the Ukraine border a pep talk.

The president told the fatigue-clad men and women that they are an "amazing group" and reminisced about his late son, Beau, who served in the Delaware Army National Guard.

Western leaders are concerned that Putin could use chemical or even nuclear weapons to regain momentum in the war.

However, on Friday, the Kremlin said U.S. talk of Russia possibly resorting to chemical weapons in Ukraine was a tactic to divert attention away from awkward questions for Washington.

Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesperson, told a conference call with reporters that the military would submit proposals to Putin on how Russia should strengthen its defenses in response to NATO beefing up its eastern flank.

There was no official position on whether Russia would rebuild Ukrainian towns and cities such as Mariupol, Peskov added.

Col.-Gen. Sergei Rudskoi, the deputy head of Russia's military general staff said Friday that 1,351 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine and 3,825 have been wounded.

NATO estimated on Wednesday that 7,000 to 15,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in four weeks of war in Ukraine.

The Russian figure did not appear to include the Moscow-backed separatists fighting in eastern Ukraine, and it was not clear whether the toll encompassed Russian forces not part of the Defense Ministry, such as the National Guard.

On Friday, officials in Moscow revised the nation's war goals and said that moving forward the "special operation" will be primarily focused on the Donbas region of Ukraine, a large area in the eastern part of the country that includes Luhansk and Donetsk.

"What I think you could be seeing is the Russians recalibrating their war aims to the new realities of the battlefield," said William Ruger, a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

Although it may sound like Russia's war aims have been reduced, Ruger warned that the Donbas could become an area of hyperfixation for Putin which could lead to a more determined and focused surge.

Ukraine's government announced the death of Russian lieutenant-general Jakiv Reztantsev, a commander of the army's 49th Combined Arms Division, Friday. The Kremlin has yet to respond to this report.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia is facing total war declared by the West.

In a meeting on Friday, Lavrov said that "a real hybrid war, total war was declared on us." He said the goal was "to destroy, break, annihilate, strangle the Russian economy and Russia on the whole."

During the first month of what Russia describes as a "special military operation" in Ukraine, the West imposed tough measures targeting Russia's economy and financial system as well as Putin and Russian oligarchs.

Despite that, Lavrov said Russia was not isolated.

"We have many friends, allies, partners in the world, a huge number of associations in which Russia is working with countries of all continents, and we will continue to do so," Lavrov said.