

Azovstal Defenders' Wives, Russian Activist Ask Pope to Help Besieged Fighters

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@gruppa_voina / Twitter

A group of Ukrainian soldiers' wives and a Russian opposition activist met Pope Francis at the Vatican to seek his help in rescuing the hundreds of Ukrainian defenders currently making a last stand at Mariupol's besieged Azovstal steel plant.

Pyotr Verzilov, a member of the Pussy Riot activist group and the publisher of the independent Mediazona news website, [wrote](#) on Twitter that the group asked the pope to "intervene in the fate of Azovstal's defenders" as Russian forces surround the plant.

Verzilov was joined by Kateryna Prokopenko and Yulia Fedosiuk, whose husbands are among the fighters in Mariupol.

"We asked him to come to Ukraine, to talk to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, to tell him 'Let them go.' He just said he would pray for us," Prokopenko told reporters after the meeting.

Her husband, Denis Prokopenko, is one of the leaders of the Azov regiment, a former far-right battalion turned National Guard unit who are leading the defense of the Azovstal steelworks in southern Ukraine.

Embed:

Папа Римский встретился с женами бойцов батальона «Азов», которые находятся на территории «Азовстали» в Мариуполе
pic.twitter.com/AqJoqIT3lq

— Медиазона (@mediazzzona) [May 11, 2022](#)

The women said their meeting with Pope Francis lasted around five minutes and took place after his weekly general audience on St. Peter's Square.

"We hope that this meeting will just give us the chance to save their lives. We are ready for the actions of the pope, from his delegation, our soldiers are ready to be evacuated to a third country," Prokopenko said.

The sprawling Azovstal plant has been under siege for over two months and remains the only part of Mariupol not occupied by Russian forces.

Ukrainian authorities announced over the weekend that all of the women, children and elderly civilians who had been sheltering in the factory had been successfully evacuated.

Their departure leaves behind hundreds of Ukrainian troops with dwindling supplies, many of whom are injured.

Fedosiuk, another member of the group, said they told the pope that "700 of our soldiers are injured, they have gangrene, amputations."

"Many of them are dead, we couldn't bury them, we asked the pope to help them, to be a third party in this war and to let them go through the (humanitarian) corridor," she said.

"He told us that he prays for us and that he is doing everything" he can.

AFP contributed reporting.

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