

Zelensky Vows More 'Retribution' for Russia as POWs Exchanged

By [AFP](#)

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President Volodymyr Zelensky at the ceremony of raising the national flag of Ukraine on Friday.

president.gov.ua

President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed more "retribution" against Russia on Ukrainian Independence Day Saturday, as Kyiv and Moscow announced the exchange of 230 prisoners just over two weeks into Ukraine's surprise offensive on Kursk.

Zelensky also signed a law banning the Russian-linked branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and called the legislation a "liberation from Moscow's devils," drawing a sharp response from Russia's Orthodox leader.

Kyiv marked its independence from the Soviet Union at a tense moment in the long war as it mounts a push into Russia and Moscow eyes more east Ukrainian towns.

Zelensky published a video of him standing in a hilly, forested area said to be near where

Ukraine launched its shock incursion on Aug. 6.

"What the enemy brought to our land has now returned to its home," he said, adding that Russia will "know what retribution is."

Putin briefed on 'invading enemy forces'

He called President Vladimir Putin a "sick man from Red Square who constantly threatens everyone with the red button," referring to nuclear war.

Zelensky later said that one of the "goals" of Kyiv's Kursk operation was to show Russians "what is more important to him (Putin): the occupation of the territories of Ukraine or the protection of his population."

Kyiv has also said that the Kursk offensive is aimed at stretching Russia's reserves from eastern Ukraine.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin held a meeting with army chief Valery Gerasimov, with the Kremlin saying they had discussed "countering enemy forces invading the Kursk region and measures being taken to destroy them."

The Kremlin's choice of language was a break from previous statements that downplayed the surprise Ukrainian move.

While it has visibly rattled Moscow, Ukraine's Kursk operation has not slowed Russia's advance in eastern Ukraine.

Embed:

Ukraine. Our land. Given by God. Kissed by the sun. Rocked by the winds. Tempered by fire. Defended by its sons and daughters.

It cannot be mistaken for anything else.

It can never be given away to anyone.

Happy Independence Day of Ukraine! pic.twitter.com/LwnRAjnZnc

— Volodymyr Zelensky / Володимир Зеленський (@ZelenskyUa) [August 24, 2024](#)

Boy watches body being removed

As Ukraine celebrated independence, Kyiv said a Russian strike on a residential of the eastern city of Kostyantynivka, which lies near the front line in the Donetsk region, killed five people.

AFP witnessed a young boy and his dog walk up to a body, covered by a sheet, on the side of the road and watch as rescuers rushed to remove it.

People embraced standing next to another body, covered by a silver sheet, before emergency services removed it in a black body bag.

Ukraine has also carried out some evacuations from the hub of Pokrovsk amid fears it will fall to advancing Russian forces.

Both Kyiv and Moscow said they had returned 115 captive servicemen each in a deal brokered by the United Arab Emirates.

Zelensky published photographs of men wrapped in Ukrainian flags, and Kyiv's ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said dozens of them included Azovstal fighters from the epic 2022 battle for the steelworks in Mariupol.

Ukraine has said one of the aims of its Kursk operation was to trade Russian captives for its men being held in Russia.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Saturday reaffirmed Berlin's "continued and unwavering solidarity" with Ukraine, despite a planned reduction in Berlin's budget for military aid to Kyiv next year.

Other European leaders also showed their support, with the EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell saying that Ukraine's "existential fight" was also "existential for the EU."

"Dear Ukrainians...the day approaches when we welcome you in the EU," European Council President Charles Michel wrote on X.

Young Russian servicemen freed

Widespread reports of young conscripts going missing in Kursk have filled the Russian internet in recent days.

Moscow released images of young-looking men on a bus, saying it freed 115 servicemen "taken prisoner in the Kursk region."

Russia said the troops were currently in Belarus and will be brought to Russia soon.

At Kyiv's Sofia Square in front of St. Michael's Cathedral, Zelensky said a new law banning the Russian-linked church "protects Ukrainian Orthodoxy from Moscow's dependence."

Ukraine has been seeking to distance itself from the Russian church since 2014 and those efforts have accelerated since Russia's 2022 invasion.

Moscow's Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill on Saturday accused Ukraine of "persecuting" believers with the ban, urging the international community to speak out.

Kirill is a firm backer of the invasion and staunch Putin ally, and earlier this week the Russian Church compared Ukraine's law to "persecutions in the Roman Empire in the times of Nero and Diocletian."

Voronezh attack

As Zelensky vowed more retribution for Russia, Ukraine's military intelligence said it had carried out a "successful" attack on an ammunition depot in Russia's southern Voronezh region, near the town of Ostrogozhsk.

Russia said Saturday its air defenses had destroyed seven Ukrainian drones over its southern Voronezh region and Belgorod and Bryansk border regions, with the Voronezh governor reporting the evacuation of a village.

Voronezh Governor Alexander Gusev earlier said a state of emergency was declared in the Ostrogozhsk district after drone strikes, with 200 people evacuated from one village.

Gusev did not say exactly what was struck but said one woman was hospitalized in "serious condition."

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