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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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27.01.2024

## ***Ukraine shoots down Russian plane carrying prisoners of war***

A Russian military transport plane carrying 65 Ukrainian soldiers to a prisoner swap was shot out of the sky on Wednesday over the Russian region of Belgorod. The defense ministry in Moscow, which is currently in the process of gathering the debris, reported that the Il-76 aircraft was hit by two Ukrainian Zenit rockets fired from Kharkov region. Shortly before the crash, Belgorod officials had issued a missile alert for their area, which has come under regular bombardment.



In this photo taken from video released by Russian Investigative Committee on Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024, the wreckage of the Il-76 is seen near Yablonovo, Belgorod region of Russia, Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024. The Il-76 crashed in a huge ball of fire in a rural area of Russia, and authorities there said all 74 people on board, including 65 POWs, six crew and three Russian servicemen, were killed. [AP Photo/Russian Investigative Committee]

All evidence indicates that the Ukrainian military, as part of its ongoing attacks on air and ground targets near the border, brought down the airliner, murdering dozens of its own soldiers and nine others in the process.

In the hours after the plane plummeted to the ground and erupted in a massive fireball, Ukraine issued a statement that, while making no mention of the crash, declared that it is targeting Russian aircraft over the Belgorod area. “The armed forces of Ukraine will continue to take measures to destroy delivery vehicles and control the airspace to eliminate the terrorist threat,” read a statement issued by the military general staff on Wednesday afternoon. Shortly thereafter, Ukraine’s Military Intelligence Directorate (HUR) reported that a planned prisoner swap scheduled for the latter part of that day had been canceled.

Kiev, aided by the Western media, is now attempting to dissemble, piling one contradictory assertion onto another. After initially boasting of its operations over Belgorod—possibly before anyone had connected the dots between the planned prisoner swap and the great “success” of their air assault—Ukraine will now neither confirm nor deny that it struck the Il-76.

Government officials veer between claiming that there were no Ukrainian POWs on the plane, saying they do not know whether their soldiers were or were not on the aircraft, insisting that Russia is using Ukrainian servicemen as “human shields” to move military supplies and declaring that they were never informed of the planned flight path for the transportation of their soldiers to the exchange meeting point. No one can get their story straight.

Russia’s defense ministry insists that its counterpart was informed of all the logistics of the prisoner swap, of which there have been nearly 50 since the start of the war. “The Ukrainian leadership knew perfectly well that today, according to the established practice, there would be the transfer by military transport plane to the airfield of Belgorod of Ukrainian servicemen for exchange,” it said.

On Wednesday, President Zelensky, whose government is riven by political conflict and who rules over a society exhausted by the war, sought out the ultimate cover. He declared that it was impossible to know what really happened because “the plane crash occurred on Russian territory — beyond our control.”

In an attempt to contain mass anger over the government’s killing of its own POWs, Zelensky laid blame for the incident on Putin and chalked popular anger over it to one of Russians “playing with the lives of Ukrainian prisoners, the feelings of their loved ones, and the emotions of our society.”

Clearly frightened about the political consequences of what it had done, Ukrainian military officials are attempting to convince people that the central issue is not that they killed 65 of their own troops, but the Kremlin's agenda: "We emphasize that the enemy is actively conducting information special operations against Ukraine aimed at destabilizing Ukrainian society," said the country's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War on its Telegram page on Wednesday.

Attempting to obfuscate its way out of the political disaster, Ukraine has now announced that its security service has launched a criminal investigation into the downing of the aircraft. However, it is unclear who they are investigating. Zelensky is demanding the same be done at the international level, where he knows he can rely on the US and NATO to cover over his government's actions.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's representatives at the UN, where the security council will hold an emergency meeting this week about the incident, taunted and threatened Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in a manner that bragged about the destruction of the plane and, by implication, the deaths of Ukrainian servicemen.

Kiev's UN representative, Serhiy Kyslytsya, said Thursday an Il aircraft is "waiting" for Lavrov, and it is "imminent."

"Von Lavrov, whose IL-Ilyushin aircraft is about to take off from JFK, is finishing his shore leave in the free world with a whimper rather than with a bang," he wrote on X yesterday.

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The downing of the Il-76 comes as Ukraine's body count in the war rises into the hundreds of thousands. Kiev's much-vaunted 2023 spring and then summer counteroffensive turned into nothing but a mass death event, with no discernible territorial or other gains.

A CNN article published January 23 about conditions on the front lines reports that Ukrainian soldiers describe the fighting today as "meat assaults."

"The dead soldiers, 'just lie there frozen,' said one special forces fighter in the Donetsk region." "Nobody evacuates them, nobody takes them away. It feels like people don't have a specific task, they just go and die," he told the press outlet.

Last month, in an article titled, “‘People Snatchers’: Ukraine’s Recruiters Use Harsh Tactics to Fill Ranks,” the *New York Times* reported that the Ukrainian government, which recently declared it needs another 450,000 to 500,000 conscripts and is proposing to lower the military-service age to 25, is resorting to intimidation and violence to press men into the army. Recruiters confiscate passports, seize people at work, shove individuals into cars, hold others against their will at conscription offices, and dispatch the mentally and physically disabled for service. Protests by families demanding a limit be set on the service terms for their relatives erupted in Ukraine in the fall of last year.

The response of the Zelensky government and its backers to Ukraine’s disasters on the field and growing internal discontent is to escalate. Over the course of the last week, Ukraine has carried out drone attacks around Russia, including in Saint Petersburg, where one strike hit a major fuel terminal. An oil depot in the Russian Black Sea city of Tuapse was demolished. Kiev’s military has made clear that they intend to continue striking at Moscow’s energy extraction and production industry.

Simultaneously, the US and NATO are in the process of conducting their Steadfast Defender 2024 military exercises, the largest in decades. They are clearly preparing for a total land war in Europe. On Thursday, the head of the British army, General Patrick Sanders, declared that the country’s population must be put on a war footing and be ready to fight in a ground conflict that requires a mass mobilization of a “citizen army.”

World Socialist 26.01.2024