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Ukraine claims 60 dead, 100 wounded, in blasts on Crimea as satellite images show destroyed Russian aircraft

Anton Gerashenko, an adviser to the Ukrainian minister of internal affairs, claimed on Thursday that 60 pilots and technicians had been killed and 100 people wounded in a series of explosions at a Russian Saki air base on the Black Sea Crimean Peninsula on Tuesday. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the air base has housed the Russian 43rd Independent Naval Assault Air Squadron.

As of this writing, there has been no official denial of this claim by Russian officials, which have only acknowledged that one person had been killed and 14 wounded. While the Kremlin has deliberately sought to downplay the significance of the incident, more and more information has emerged indicating that it was far more serious than Russian officials have been willing to admit.

The blasts on Tuesday occurred close to a tourist resort, prompting panic among thousands of tourists, some of whom sought to leave the peninsula immediately. The Associated Press quoted one local resident who had heard a roar and saw a mushroom cloud from his window: "Everything began to fall around, collapse."

Crimean officials have acknowledged that 62 apartment and 20 commercial buildings were damaged, and at least 250 people had to be temporarily evacuated. Satellite images appear to show that about 2 square kilometers (0.75 square miles) of grassland were burned at the air base, and two buildings destroyed.

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These images also indicate that at least seven Russian war planes were destroyed and two damaged. This would mark the biggest loss of Russian military aircraft in a single day since World War II. Based on the satellite images, the destroyed aircraft were Su-24 and Su-30 fighter jets, each of which cost over \$24 million.

There has been no official acknowledgment from Ukraine that it conducted strikes on Crimea. However, Oleksyi Arestovych, an advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, effectively claimed Ukrainian responsibility for the blasts, stating that they had been caused either by Ukrainian-made long-range weapons or by Ukrainian guerrillas operating in Crimea. Without explicitly referring to the blasts, Zelensky stated on Tuesday, “Crimea is Ukrainian and we will never give it up.”

The Kremlin’s response to the blasts on Crimea was reminiscent to its reaction to the humiliating sinking of the Moskva, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea fleet, in March. Clearly seeking to downplay what would represent a grave military setback and the basis for a potentially major escalation of the war, the Russian government has vehemently denied that the blasts were the result of an attack by Ukraine. Instead, the Kremlin claims that the blasts were caused by the detonation of stored ammunition. The Russian media, which is only allowed to refer to the war as a “special military operation,” has virtually ceased all coverage of the incident.

The Saki air base is at least 125 miles or 200 kilometers from the closest Ukrainian military position and none of the weapons and ammunition officially in the arsenal of the Ukrainian army can strike targets that far away. The ammunition for the American-made HIMARS rocket system, which the US has been officially delivering since May, can only hit targets of a distance of up to 50 miles.

The German magazine *Spiegel* surmised that the blasts could have been caused by a Ukrainian Grim-2 short range missile, which has been in development since 2003 and could strike targets at a distance of up to 280 kilometers. Alternatively, the *Spiegel* noted, Ukraine could have used a modified Neptun missile which may have also caused the sinking of the Moskva. In either scenario, Russian missile defense systems on Crimea could have only been circumvented by American AGM-88 anti-radar missiles. Remnants of such a missile were recently found on Ukrainian territory even though the US has not

confirmed that AGM-88 missiles were among the weapons and ammunition that Washington has officially delivered to Ukraine.

The *Spiegel* wrote, “This could mean that Kiev’s most important partners may have delivered also other weapons to Ukraine in secret, such as the MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS). The ATACMS can be used by the American HIMARS as well as the German and British M-270 multiple launch rocket systems, which have been deployed in Ukraine for the past several weeks and have been causing serious problems, especially for Russian logistics. Currently, they [these rocket systems] can only reach up to 80 kilometers with the GMLRS-rockets, but with ATACMS they could reach up to 300 kilometers, which theoretically could make strikes on Crimea possible.”

The blasts on Crimea occurred against the backdrop of ever more aggressive threats by the Ukrainian military and President Volodymyr Zelensky, that they were determined to “recover Crimea.” The US-backed adoption of the “recovery of Crimea” as Ukraine’s official military doctrine in March 2021 was a major factor in provoking the Russian invasion of February 24 and Russian officials have repeatedly warned that they could respond with nuclear weapons to any attack on Crimea. In July, a Pentagon spokesman has notably refused to preclude that American missiles will be used to strike the Russian-built Kerch bridge, which connects Crimea with the Russian mainland.

Writing for the *Washington Post*, David Ignatius interpreted the presumed Ukrainian attack on Crimea as the beginning of a long-announced “southern offensive.” Russian troops have now occupied about a fifth of Ukrainian territory, including most of the East and significant parts of the south. It is expected that the Kremlin will organize referendums in these territories about joining Russia in the coming weeks, and an offensive by Ukraine would not least of all be aimed at preempting such a development.

There is little question that any offensive, as well as any strike on Crimea, are not only carried out with the weapons and ammunition delivered by the imperialist powers, but also discussed and prepared in the closest consultation with Washington. Having staged a coup in Kiev in 2014 to install a NATO-compliant regime in Ukraine and transform the country into a launching pad for war against Russia, the US, Britain, Germany and other NATO powers have delivered weapons and ammunition to Ukraine worth tens of billions of dollars since February alone. Just this Monday, the Biden administration approved the

largest single military aid package to Ukraine yet, worth \$1 billion, including for ammunition for the HIMARS rocket systems and 1,000 Javelin missiles.

Only a week before the blasts on Crimea, Ukraine's deputy head of military intelligence, Vadim Skibitsky, gave a provocative interview to the British *Telegraph*, acknowledging that every Ukrainian strike on Russian targets was preceded by discussions with the US which "would allow Washington to stop any potential attacks if they were unhappy with the intended target." Skibitsky also said that "we use real-time information" provided by the Americans to strike Russian targets.

The imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has already claimed the lives of over 5,000 civilians, while the losses among troops on both sides are estimated in the tens of thousands. Over a fourth of the country's prewar population of under 40 million has been turned into refugees. An offensive in the south and an attempt to "recover Crimea" by Ukraine would directly threaten the lives of thousands, if not millions more, even as US imperialism is escalating its war provocations against China over Taiwan in the Pacific.

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