https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/world/europe/azovstal-mariupol.html?searchResultPosition=2

**The Ukrainian authorities declare an end to the combat mission in Mariupol after weeks of Russian siege.**

KYIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian authorities announced late Monday an end to their combat operation in the besieged city of Mariupol, where Ukrainian fighters have held out for weeks in the face of near-constant Russian bombardment.

The military ordered the remaining troops who had been sheltering beneath a steel factory there to focus on efforts “to save the lives of their personnel.”

“We hope that we will be able to save the lives of our guys,” President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a late-night video address. “I want to emphasize that Ukraine needs Ukrainian heroes alive.”

The Azovstal steel plant — the last stand of Ukrainian resistance in the decimated city — has become a powerful symbol of the suffering inflicted by Russia and the stalwart bravery of Ukrainian defenders. Billboards and murals supporting the city and the plant have appeared across the country.

In a statement late Monday, Ukraine’s General Staff said that the Mariupol garrison had “fulfilled its combat mission.”

Ukrainian officials said that evacuations from the Azovstal steel factory had begun. The military said that 264 service members, 53 of them “seriously injured,” had been taken by bus to areas controlled by Russian forces.

The announcement came hours after the Russian news media began reporting that buses of Ukrainian servicemen were being evacuated from the steelworks, near the center of Mariupol, the last territory in the city not to fall to Russian troops.

Deputy Defense Minister Anna Malyar said that 53 “seriously injured” people had been evacuated to a medical facility in Novoazovsk, a Ukrainian town near the Russian border controlled by Moscow-backed separatists. According to the Ukrainian military’s General Staff, another 211 people were evacuated via a humanitarian corridor to Olenivka, also under Russian control, and would then be returned to Ukrainian-held territory “under an exchange procedure.”

It was unclear how many soldiers remained inside the plant, with officials and relatives of the fighters saying in recent days that there could be as many as 2,000, including hundreds who were injured. Ukraine’s General Staff said that “measures to save the defenders who remain on the territory of Azovstal are ongoing.”

The evacuation comes after weeks of pleas from the soldiers and civilians who had been holed up in the factory with inadequate supplies or medical care.

On May 8, Mr. Zelensky announced that more than 300 civilians had been evacuated by the United Nations and the International Red Cross. Negotiating safe passage for the trapped soldiers, most of whom are from Ukraine’s elite Azov regiment, proved more difficult. Wives and relatives of the soldiers had traveled to the Vatican and to Istanbul, [making impassioned pleas for assistance](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/10/world/europe/ukraine-mariupol-soldiers-wives.html?searchResultPosition=3).

Early Tuesday, the full details of the plan remained murky.

“In order to save lives, the entire Mariupol garrison is implementing the approved decision of the Supreme Military Command and hopes for the support of the Ukrainian people,” Lt. Col. Denys Prokopenko, the commander of the now combined forces in the bunkers, said in a message posted on the garrison’s official Telegram channel Monday evening. He did not say what the order was or how it would be carried out.

Pro-Russian social media accounts speculated that the Ukrainian soldiers would be treated and then exchanged for Russian prisoners of war, but there was no official statement on the full terms of any agreement. Other pro-Russian social media accounts trumpeted the evacuation as a triumph that would deal a severe blow to the morale of Ukrainian troops fighting in the region.

Ever since the port city was surrounded by Russian forces in early March, military analysts had predicted that the soldiers would be defeated or killed any day. Yet they fought on — with the national Ukrainian military command reporting battles around the perimeter as recently as this past weekend.

At the same time, Russian forces continued to rain bombs and artillery down on the four square miles of twisted metal that used to be one of the country’s largest steel plants.

In recent days, Turkey had said that it was working on a plan to evacuate the soldiers by sea but that there was no indication that Russia would accept any proposal and active fighting complicated any discussion of the matter.