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Ukraine suffered losses during chaotic withdrawal as Russia seized Avdiivka

By [Siobh  n O'Grady](#) and Anastacia Galouchka

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Drone operators with the Ukrainian Security Services at a coal and chemical plant near Avdiivka, Ukraine, on Feb. 6. (Wojciech Grzedzinski for The Washington Post)

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KYIV — Ukraine failed to safely evacuate all its troops from the eastern city of Avdiivka during its disorderly retreat last weekend, despite claims from its new top military commander that the move was designed to save lives and avoid encirclement by the advancing Russians.

Instead, at least six wounded troops from the 110th Brigade became trapped behind Russian lines, where they appear to have later been executed, the brigade said in a statement posted on Facebook.

Members of the military who participated in the operation said they were unsure how many others had also been left behind — but any number of casualties is sure to further

deteriorate morale on the front line as Ukrainian troops, already outgunned and outnumbered, struggle to replenish their ranks and await further assistance from the West.

Russia’s capture of Avdiivka, a strategic and now almost entirely destroyed city located about 15 miles from the occupied regional capital of Donetsk, was Moscow’s most significant territorial victory since seizing Bakhmut last May.

In its statement, the 110th Brigade said that constant attacks from Russian aircraft, artillery and drones made it impossible “to evacuate several seriously wounded and dead servicemen.”

After Russian forces surrounded some of the troops, Ukraine tried to make contact with Russia through intermediaries to request that the wounded be treated and taken prisoner. The brigade said Russia agreed but later posted footage showing that three of the soldiers were already dead. Ukraine separately confirmed two of the other wounded soldiers were also killed, the brigade said, and it is still seeking information about a sixth.

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The footage has circulated on Ukrainian social media, and Ukrainian media outlets reported that family members confirmed the deaths of their relatives seen in the video.

Other members of Ukraine’s military who were familiar with the final weeks of fighting in Avdiivka and Ukraine’s rapid withdrawal from the city said the situation was chaotic and poorly planned. The accounts suggest that the retreat, ordered by Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, who was named as Ukraine’s top commander by President Volodymyr Zelensky earlier this month, was a grim and dangerous operation — and hardly the orderly pullback to “more advantageous positions” that Ukrainian military officials claimed at the time.

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One soldier, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the situation, said that some troops were ordered to “take positions that were already either lost or destroyed.”

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Constant Russian attacks made the task impossible, with Russian forces outnumbering Ukrainians 7 to 1. Russia constantly bombarded the area, launching as many as 60 guided aviation bombs per day, which Ukraine could not repel because of lack of antiaircraft defenses.

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The soldier said that troops in the 110th Brigade were exhausted after serving without rotations for two years, and their fatigue led them to abandon their positions “without prior coordination.”

“The situation was not saved systematically, but by randomly throwing in units,” the soldier said. “They did not unlock the pincers that formed around Avdiivka in time ... and it gave the enemy an opportunity to form a bridgehead.”

[*Bullet-riddled body found in Spain was Russian defector, Ukraine says*]

Serhiy, 41, a platoon commander in the 53rd Brigade who spoke on the condition his last name not be used in keeping with military rules, said that he left Avdiivka four days ago. He said all troops from his battalion managed to escape the city but he understands that others “did get stuck.”

If the retreat from the city was even planned at all, the platoon commander said, “it was planned very badly.”

By the time reserve troops arrived, the last evacuation road out of the city was nearly cut off, Serhiy said. Over the weekend, he helped evacuate pilots from the area at 5 or 6 a.m. and by 8 a.m. the road they used was already controlled by Russians. His troops planned to return, but amid heavy rain and rapid Russian advances they were later instructed not to reenter the city, even off-road.

Due to severe exhaustion, the commander said he could not remember if they left on Saturday or Sunday. His platoon has already redeployed to areas around the city and is now fighting in “a very difficult situation,” he said.

The hasty retreat and the loss of Avdiivka “broke the boys a little bit psychologically,” Serhiy said. “A lot of guided aerial bombs, a lot of aviation. Honestly speaking, most people are in shock by all of this.”

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