Dozens feared dead after Russian strike on civilian convoy near Zaporizhzhia

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By [Peter Beaumont](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/peterbeaumont) and Artem Mazhulin

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A civilian convoy of cars heading to pick up relatives trying to flee Russian-occupied territory in [Ukraine](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ukraine) has been hit by Moscow’s forces near the city of Zaporizhzhia, with initial reports saying dozens of people were killed and injured. That casualty figure could not immediately be confirmed.

Footage posted on social media showed a horrific scene with dead and injured people lying on a road on the south-eastern outskirts of the city. In one video, taken from inside a nearby building, a woman can be heard sobbing, saying repeatedly: “Dead people are lying there.”

At least one crater was visible in other images showing cars that had taken the full force of the blast.

The attack on the convoy on Friday morning came amid a feared Russian escalation in its war in Ukraine, as the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, prepared to publicly sign annexation orders for four regions, which some fear will lead to an increase in attacks on Ukrainian cities.

Meanwhile, a large number of Russian forces in the strategic Donbas town of Lyman were reported to have been encircled in the latest setback for Putin.

The governor of Zaporizhzhia region, Oleksandr Starukh, said in a statement: “The enemy launched an attack on a civilian convoy and the outskirts of the city. People were standing in line to leave for the occupied territory to pick up their relatives and to deliver aid. There are dead and wounded. Emergency services are at the site.

“At the moment there are 23 dead and 28 wounded, all civilians,” he added. Those figures were later updated to 25 dead and more than 50 injured.

Kyrylo Tymoshenko, an adviser to the Ukrainian presidency, said: “The terror continues. The killings continue. Sixteen missiles were launched using S-300 air defence.”

Confirming the number of dead, he said four missiles hit near a sprawling car parts market where the convoy had gathered.

“There was a convoy of cars with civilians on their way to the temporarily occupied territory to pick up their relatives.”

At the site of the blast, in a wooded area just outside the city, police and military were clearing the scene after discovering another unexploded munition, with the dead and wounded removed to nearby hospitals.

Even five hours after the attack it remained a scene of utter carnage with broken bodies spread around the site. Many, it appears, had been standing outside of their vehicles, not far from a registration point with white tents and a desk, when the missile flew in exploding about 10 metres from the cars and leaving a huge crater.

In one car, a man was still sat slumped dead with one hand gripping his steering wheel, the windows blown out. Another body was slumped on its knees covered with a blanket next to the luggage they were pulling a few metres away.

According to locals, 60 cars had gathered on a road in two lines after registering for a convoy that was due to take people back into the Russian-occupied territories in the south, some planning to return to homes in places such as Mariupol, others planning to fetch relatives and bring them to government-occupied territory for fear that Russia would prevent people from leaving following Friday’s annexation ceremony.

Standing on the road, Dalina Yakushava, 48, had arrived after the explosion to see if she could register for a convoy.

“This is where people are told to come and register by the authorities to join a convoy. You register online but I came to make sure my permission had been received. I live in Mariupol. We just drove our daughter to Poland but we need to go back because my parents are there. It’s terrible but it is our home.

“There were a lot of cars waiting to leave this morning because no one has been able to go into the occupied areas for the past week.”

Volodmyr Marchuk, a spokesperson for the governor’s office, said the site was “a logistic hub to allow people go into the temporarily Russian occupied territories. The Russians only accept 150 cars a day so that’s why we created a programme, where people could come register and get their number in line.

“So at 7.15 in the morning there were a large number of cars waiting for the turn to cross, mostly people who want to go to and drop off aid to relatives and maybe pick up people who want to leaver on the way back.

“They hit that queue with an S-300 missile. There’s no doubt it is a deliberate war crime. They always say they are aiming at a military object and hit something else. But there are no military objects near that site. That’s why there’s no doubt that’s it’s a terrorist act.”

In the hours before the attack, Russia launched strikes on several cities, including the centre of the nearby city of Dnipro.

Putin was preparing to hold a ceremony on Friday for the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, while his Ukrainian counterpart said the Russian president would have to be stopped if Moscow was to avoid the most damaging consequences of the war.

Russia’s expected annexation of the Russian-occupied areas of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, which follow sham referendums in the territories, has been widely condemned by the west. The UN chief, António Guterres, said it was a “dangerous escalation” that would jeopardise prospects for peace.

The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, said in an address on Thursday evening: “It can still be stopped. But to stop it we have to stop that person in Russia who wants war more than life. Your lives, citizens of Russia.”

The four regions cover about 35,000 sq miles (90,000 sq km), or about 15% of Ukraine’s total area – roughly the size of Hungary or Portugal.

Russian government officials have said the four regions will fall under Moscow’s nuclear umbrella once they have been formally incorporated into Russia. Putin has said he could use nuclear weapons to defend Russian territory if necessary.

Ukraine has said it will seek to take back its territory.

Mykhailo Podolyak, Zelenskiy’s adviser, told the Italian newspaper La Repubblica: “Referendums have no legal value. Under international law the regions are, and remain, territories of Ukraine, and Ukraine is ready to do anything to take them back.

“They were sham votes, in which few people participated. To those who went to vote they pointed their rifles in their faces ordering: ‘Vote!’.”

Zelenskiy promised a strong response to the annexations and summoned his defence and security chiefs for an emergency meeting on Friday, where “fundamental decisions” would be taken, an official said.

On the eve of the annexation ceremony in the Georgievsky Hall of the Great Kremlin Palace and a concert in Red Square, Putin said that “all mistakes” made in a mobilisation announced last week would be corrected, his first public acknowledgment that the call-up had not gone smoothly.

Thousands of men have left Russia to avoid the draft that was billed as enlisting those with military experience and required specialities, but has often appeared oblivious to individuals’ service records, health, student status or even age.

At Friday’s event, Putin will give a speech, meet leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic as well as the Moscow-installed leaders of the parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia that Russian forces occupy.

The Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, did not say whether the president would attend the concert, as he did a similar event in 2014 after Russia proclaimed it had annexed Ukraine’s Crimea region.

A stage has been set up in the Moscow square with giant video screens and billboards proclaiming the four areas to be part of Russia.

The US president, Joe Biden, said the US would never recognise Russia’s claims on Ukraine’s territory, denouncing the referendums.

“The results were manufactured in Moscow,” Biden said at a conference of Pacific Island leaders on Thursday.

The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, pressed Putin in a call to take steps to reduce tensions in Ukraine.

Guterres told reporters: “Any decision to proceed with the annexation … would have no legal value and deserves to be condemned.”