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RUSSIA: No political will to repatriate dead bodies of their soldiers

No political will to repatriate dead bodies of their soldiers

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

✘ HRWF (12.12.2022) – Dozens of thousands of Russian soldiers have been killed while many of them have been abandoned on the battlefields of Ukraine and there is only little hope that their families will get back their dead bodies.

If they are only considered “missing”, no financial compensation will be paid to the families. Moreover, the fewer public funerals there will be the better, as the Russian population will continue to be kept in the dark about the magnitude of the human losses in Ukraine and will be less likely to protest against the war.

Ukraine’s Permanent Representative complained at the UN

In early March, Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations, Serhiy Kyslytsia, called at a meeting of the UN Security Council on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to assist Ukraine in removing the thousands of bodies of dead Russian soldiers decomposing on the battle fields of Ukraine.

“Given that the Russian leadership is trying to hide the real losses and strongly denies any talk of ways to repatriate the bodies of their soldiers, Ukraine faces an additional threat of a health crisis. We are talking about many thousands of bodies decomposing in the fields of Ukraine – the bodies of Russian soldiers,” he said.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk then then stated that the Russian leadership flatly refused to remove its fallen soldiers from Ukraine.

Russian dead bodies are piling up, Ukrainian officials say

An article published by NPR Agency on 14 June revealed some concrete aspects of the issue:

“Ukrainian officials wouldn’t specify how many Russian corpses sit unclaimed in overcrowded morgues and refrigerated railway cars. Ukraine and Russia have exchanged the remains of only about 200 troops from each side in recent weeks, according to Ukraine’s government.

Ukrainian authorities insist that the bodies of Russian soldiers are piling up because the Kremlin refuses to acknowledge them.

Liamzin, head of Ukraine's civil-military cooperation, repeatedly declined to answer NPR's questions about how exchanges of soldiers' remains are conducted but he told reporters last month that the Ukrainian side is "ready to return [the bodies] even today or tomorrow."

In Russia, meanwhile, trying to retrieve the body of a soldier killed in Ukraine is challenging because 'everything is kept secret' by Russian authorities, says Valentina Melnikova, executive secretary of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, a Russian nonprofit group that advocates for military families.

Melnikova says there is no official list of the Russian soldiers who have died or gone missing in Ukraine, 'and so the entire story falls on the relatives to write and call everywhere' in search of information.

She adds that even when photos of deceased soldiers with metal ID tags appear online or in social media forums, Russian officials push back that they could be fakes.

Ukrainian Railways providing refrigerated cars

"Ukrzaliznytsia, the state-owned Ukrainian Railways, said in a statement on its website that it had provided Ukraine's armed forces with 20 refrigerated cars for the removal of dead Russian soldiers from several areas, including Odessa. Just 72 hours later, Ukrzaliznytsia's chairman posted a message on his personal Telegram channel saying that Russia never came to load them. 'For the sake of 'victorious' propaganda, they are ready to deprive mothers of even the opportunity to bury the bodies,' Oleksandr Kamyshin wrote.

Ukraine's government said it is still waiting to receive a request from Russian authorities for the repatriation of the

bodies of those killed. The Ukrainian deputy prime minister said the issue of collecting and identifying the bodies had been discussed in a meeting between Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal and the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, on Thursday. But the ICRC has not confirmed whether it is assisting Ukraine in the return of Russian remains to their home country, which is provided for under international law.

Hints at the scale of Russia's troop losses have begun to emerge in videos and reports. On March 18, the Belarus service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a US-funded media organization, published images of Russian ambulance convoys appearing to arrive at field hospitals in southern Belarus, near Ukraine's border, and reported that morgues in the area were overflowing. A March 21 report by English-language Ukrainian media outlet The Kyiv Independent followed a Ukrainian emergency response unit digging up Russian soldiers buried in unmarked communal graves in Rusaniv, a village east of the capital – left in a heap without identification documents or IDs. (Source: CNN, 23 March).

Red Cross: "We are not a funeral home"

This is what Gérard Pontrandolfi, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) representative in Kyiv said in an interview with Ukrainska Pravda – Zhyttia (4 April).

"The authorities are trying to make the ICRC responsible for this. We are not a funeral home. But we can provide everything they need," Pontrandolfi said.

According to him, the ICRC also needs information about the victims in order to inform their families.

"And, to be honest, I don't care what family it is – from Ukraine or Russia. I want to make sure that every parent, every mother has the opportunity to know where her dead child is. And we are ready to support the government in this. But

this is the authorities' duty to return the bodies", said the representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Kyiv.

Dead or alive? About the lies of the Russian military

On 14 July, the BBC published the testimony of a Russian mother who, under cover of anonymity, told how the army had lied to her about the situation of her son:

"At the beginning of March, a sergeant telephoned me from my son's base. He probably called all the parents," she says.

"He told me the lads are fine, that they're in contact with them every day. We kept in touch throughout March and he kept saying that they were fine.

"Then a man claiming to be a friend of my son sent me a message. I didn't know him. He found me on social media. He told me my son's leg had been blown off and that he was dead. I made lots of calls and tried to meet officials. But no one could tell me anything.

"Eventually the sergeant I'd been talking with said to me: 'Your son last made contact on 23 February.'

"So why have you been calling [to say everything is fine]? Just to calm us down?"

"Sorry, I'm only a sergeant,' he'd said."

The mother wrote twice to the military district office and the Defence Ministry to know where, when and how her son had 'disappeared' but she did not get any answer. All she was told is that he was taking part in the 'special military operation' and that he was missing."

No change since the beginning of the war

On 4 November, the New York Times said in an article titled

“Frustrating and Often Fruitless: The Search for Missing Russian Soldiers.” Russian families searching for loved ones say the system for finding missing soldiers has been disorganized and marked by dysfunction from the beginning.

All experts analyzing Russia’s war on Ukraine agree that President Putin does not care about his soldiers whose lives are just cannon fodder. So, how could he feel concerned about their dead bodies.

Moreover, remembering the politically destabilizing role the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers played during Russia’s war in Afghanistan, it is part of his strategy to keep silent or to lie about the number of human losses.

Propaganda about generous compensation to be paid to families having lost a son or a father is just a smoke screen and a mirage. There will be an inflation of “missing” soldiers in the official discourse because they are not considered dead soldiers. When the Moskva was sunk by the Ukrainian army in the Black Sea, the seamen whose bodies were not found were considered “missing”.

Russian citizens should keep in mind that in Moscow, there is no political will to repatriate the dead bodies of Russian soldiers.

Photo 1: White van, marked with a red cross and number 200 – the military code for transporting dead soldiers

Photo 2: Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the UN, Serhiy Kyslytsia, complaining that Russia abandons the corpses of its soldiers (Ukrinform)

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