

RUSSIA WITHDRAWS FROM SNAKE ISLAND

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Back in control: A satellite image of the Snake Island in the Black Sea taken on June 17. AFP/Maxar Technologies-

Russian forces abandoned the strategic Black Sea outpost of Snake Island on Thursday, in a major victory for Ukraine that could loosen the grip of Russia's blockade on Ukrainian ports.

Russia's Defence Ministry said it had decided to withdraw from the outcrop as a "gesture of goodwill" to show Moscow was not obstructing UN efforts to open a humanitarian corridor allowing grains to be shipped from Ukraine.

Ukraine said it had driven the Russian forces out after a massive artillery and missile assault overnight.

"KABOOM!" tweeted Andriy Yermak, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's Chief of Staff. "No Russian troops on the Snake Island anymore. Our Armed Forces did a great job."

Ukraine's southern military command posted an image on Facebook of what appeared to be the island, seen from the air, with at least five huge columns of black smoke rising above it.

"The enemy hurriedly evacuated the remains of the garrison with two speed boats and probably left the island. Currently, Snake island is consumed by fire, explosions are bursting."

The bare rocky outcrop overlooks sea lanes to Odesa, Ukraine's main Black Sea port, where Russia is blocking food cargos from one of the world's leading grain suppliers.

Snake Island has held the world's attention since Russia seized it on the war's first day, when a Ukrainian guard, ordered by Russia's flagship cruiser Moskva to surrender, responded by ridiculing them.

Grain exports

"The most significant aspect is that this could open the door to Ukrainian grain exports from Odesa, which is critical for Ukraine's economy and for the global food supply," tweeted Rob Lee, a senior fellow at the U.S.-based Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Lifting the blockade has been a primary strategic goal of the West: U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has accused Russia of deliberately causing world hunger, as "blackmail." Moscow denies blocking the ports and blames food shortages on Western sanctions it says limit its own exports.

"We do not prevent the export of Ukrainian grain. The Ukrainian military has mined the approaches to their ports; no one prevents them from clearing those mines and we guarantee the safety of shipping grain out of there," President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.

Russia had defended the island since February, despite Ukraine increasingly claiming to inflict severe damage, sinking supply vessels and destroying Russian fortifications.

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