News

A Russian soldier stands guard at a polling station in Ukraine's Donetsk region Sept. 23, 2022

A Russian soldier stands guard at a polling station in Ukraine's Donetsk region Sept. 23, 2022. At the end of voting Sept. 27, Russia is expected to announce that the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson voted to join Russia. (CNS photo/Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations)



by Catholic News Service

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Religious leaders in Ukraine called for safe return of prisoners of war, civilian hostages and all those who were forcibly taken to Russia.

In a separate statement, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations -- which includes Christians, Muslims and Jews -- also called the referendums on annexation of parts of Ukraine "a mockery of democracy."

The council -- which includes Ukraine's Byzantine and Latin-rite bishops -- issued the statements Sept. 23, after 215 prisoners were released in exchange for Viktor Medvedchuk, a former Ukrainian member of Parliament, as well as 54 others. Dmytro Lubinets, Ukrainian Parliament commissioner for human rights, cosigned the statement on prisoners.

"Thousands of our defenders and civilians are held captive by the Russian invaders," said the council statement. "In most cases, Russia does not provide any information about their fate, ignoring all norms of international humanitarian law. Information

coming from various sources indicates that our people are subjected to brutal torture and physical and psychological pressure. They are kept in inhumane conditions, often left without water and food."

The commission appealed to the international community as well as international human rights and security organizations to work for the safe return of those being held.

In a separate video message, Ukrainian Catholic Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk thanked God that, "perhaps for the first time in recent months, we have received good news about the release of our prisoners of war. We thank God for saving their lives. Now we have to surround them with attention, prayer and love in order to heal the wounds they bear on their souls and bodies after the brutality of the Russian occupier."

Bishop Vitalii Kryvytskyi of Kyiv-Zhytomyr, chairman of the Latin-rite bishops' church-state commission, also spoke of the prisoners' release, describing them as "exhausted but unbroken."

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"They were kept captive for a while yet remained free in spirit," he wrote on his Facebook page. "We wish them a speedy recovery. We are grateful to God for heeding our prayers. I am grateful to those who took the initiative to return our men home. Let us continue to pray for those in captivity and those who never returned from there. For God, everyone is alive, and he has the power to save them."

The referendums on joining the Russian Federation, held in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, were to be held Sept. 23-27. The Washington Post reported some residents said they were being forced "to vote 'under a gun barrel.'"

The religious leaders' council referred to the vote as "pseudo-referendums." It said they were "an illegal and forceful attempt to annex part of Ukraine's territory," and they encouraged Ukrainians not to vote.

They also asked "authorities of the Russian Federation to abandon the criminal plan of annexation, which violates not only the human laws of the cohabitation of peoples

but also the relevant regulations of the Christian, Islamic and Jewish Holy Scriptures."

If Russia claims the territories as its own and Ukraine tries to retake the regions, Russia could claim Ukraine was attacking it, escalating the war that began with Russia's invasion Feb. 24.

In 2014, Russia invaded the Crimea region of Ukraine and annexed it. The U.N. and the majority of the world's nations do not recognize Crimea as part of Russia.