



PUTIN SAYS HE WON'T RENEW THE GRAIN DEAL UNTIL THE WEST MEETS HIS DEMANDS - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, listens to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during their meeting at Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, Monday, Sept. 4, 2023.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday that a landmark deal allowing Ukraine to export grain safely through the Black Sea amid the war won't be restored until the West meets Moscow's demands on its own agricultural exports.

Ukraine and its Western allies have dismissed the Kremlin's demands as a ploy to advance its own interests.

Still, Putin's remarks dashed hopes that his talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan could revive an agreement seen as vital for global food supplies, especially in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Russia refused to extend the deal in July, complaining that a parallel agreement promising to remove obstacles to Russian exports of food and fertilizer hadn't been honored. It said restrictions on shipping and insurance hampered its agricultural trade, though it has shipped record amounts of wheat since last year.

Putin reiterated those complaints Monday, while also telling reporters that if those commitments were honored, Russia could return to the deal "within days."

Erdogan also expressed hope that a breakthrough could come soon. He said Turkey and the U.N. — which both brokered the original deal — have put together a new package of proposals to unblock the issue.

"We believe that we will reach a solution that will meet the expectations in a short time," Erdogan said at the news conference held with Putin in the Russian resort of Sochi.

Earlier, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock lashed out, saying Putin's "game with the grain agreement is cynical."

"It's only because of Putin that the freighters don't have free passage again," she told reporters in Berlin.

A lot is riding on the negotiation. Ukraine and Russia are major suppliers of wheat, barley, sunflower oil and other goods that developing

nations rely on.



Data from the Joint Coordination Center in Istanbul, which organized shipments under the deal, show that 57% of the grain from Ukraine went to developing nations, with the top destination being China.

Grain prices shot up after Russia pulled out of the deal but have since fallen back, indicating that there isn't a big crunch in the market for the moment.

But failure to revive the agreement will have "drastic impacts" in countries such as Somalia and Egypt that rely heavily on Black Sea grain, according to Galip Dalay, an associate fellow at the Chatham House think tank in London.

Putin is looking for some relief from sanctions and at the same time is engaged in a "war of narratives," Dalay said, because the Russian leader "doesn't want to come across as the bad guy in the eyes of the global south as a result of this food insecurity."

Ukraine and its allies have often noted that Russia's move left many developing nations in the lurch, since so many were recipients of the grain.

Perhaps in an effort to address that accusation, Putin said Monday that Russia was close to finalizing an agreement to provide free grain to six African countries. Last month, he promised shipments to Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, Eritrea and Central African Republic.

The Russian leader added that the country will ship 1 million metric tons (1.1 million tons) of cheap grain to Turkey for processing and delivery to poor countries.

In addition to pulling out of the grain deal, Russia has repeatedly attacked the Odesa region, where Ukraine's main Black Sea port is. Hours before the Sochi meeting, the Kremlin's forces launched a second barrage in two days on the area. The Ukrainian air force said it intercepted 23 of 32 drones that targeted the Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk regions. It did not specify damage caused by those that got through.

Russia may be hoping it can use its power over Ukraine's Black Sea exports as a bargaining chip to reduce Western economic sanctions.

Some companies have been wary of doing business with Russia because of those sanctions, even though Western allies have made assurances that food and fertilizer are exempt. Still, Moscow remains unsatisfied.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on Monday urged Moscow to return to the deal, insisting "there were no legal and political grounds for Russia to withdraw from the agreement."

Monday's talks took place against a backdrop of Ukraine's recent counteroffensive against the Kremlin's invasion forces.

In the latest development, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday that Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov would be replaced this week. The job requires "new approaches," Zelenskyy said, without elaborating. Reznikov on Monday published a photo of his resignation letter.

Putin and Erdogan — authoritarian leaders who have both been in power for more than two decades — are said to have a close rapport, fostered in the wake of a failed coup against Erdogan in 2016 when Putin was the first major leader to offer his support.

The Turkish president has maintained those during the 18-month war in Ukraine. Turkey hasn't joined Western sanctions against Russia following its invasion, emerging as a main trading partner and logistical hub for Russia's overseas trade.

At the same time, Turkey, a member of NATO, has also supported kraine, sending arms, meeting Zelenskyy and backing Kyiv's bid to join the Western alliance.

Russia, meanwhile, has taken steps to strengthen its military ties with North Korea. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who traveled to Pyongyang last month, said Monday that the two countries may hold joint war games.

U.S. National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson noted that Shoigu sought to persuade North Korea during his trip to sell artillery ammunition to Russia.

The U.S. has reason to think North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un "expects these discussions to continue" and "to include leader-level diplomatic engagement in Russia," Watson said Monday.

Another U.S. official, who was not authorized to address the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said the U.S. expects Kim will travel to Russia within the month. The official said the U.S. isn't sure exactly where or when the meeting would take place, but the Pacific port city of Vladivostok would be a likely possibility given its relative proximity to North Korea.

The White House reported last week that it had intelligence indicating that Putin and Kim swapped letters following Shoigu's visit. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the letters were "more at the surface level" but that Russian and North Korean talks on a weapons sale were advancing.

Associated Press writer Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this story.

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