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Putin Says West Ignoring Russian Concerns But Hopes for 'Solution'

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Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. **EPA**

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday accused the West of ignoring Moscow's security concerns and of using Ukraine as a tool to contain Russia, though he said he hoped a solution could be found to end spiralling tensions.

Putin said the Kremlin was studying a response from Washington and NATO to Moscow's security demands, but that it had been far from adequate.

They were his first public remarks for weeks on the crisis which has been fuelled by fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"It is already clear that fundamental Russian concerns ended up being ignored," Putin told reporters after talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Moscow.

Putin repeated Russia's demands for legally binding security guarantees against further NATO expansion and the deployment of strike facilities near Russia's borders, as well as for NATO's

return to military positions from before 1997.

"It seems to me that the United States is not so much concerned about the security of Ukraine... The main task is to contain Russia's development," Putin said, calling Ukraine "a tool to reach this goal".

"I hope that in the end we will find a solution, although it will not be simple," Putin said.

'Clear and present danger'

Tensions between Russia and the West have reached levels not seen since the end of the Cold War after Moscow massed more than 100,000 troops near its borders with Ukraine.

Western leaders have accused Moscow of preparing an invasion of its pro-Western neighbour and warned of severe consequences if it invades.

Russia insists it has no plans to attack and has instead put forward its own proposals it says would ease tensions.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday urged Russia to "immediately" de-escalate tensions and withdraw its troops in a call with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

Lavrov said Washington had agreed in the call to further discussions on Moscow's demands.

"Let's see how things go," he said.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was meanwhile in Kyiv to meet with President Volodymyr Zelensky in a show of support for Ukraine.

"It is vital that Russia steps back and chooses a path of diplomacy, and I believe that is still possible," Johnson said at a press conference with Zelensky after the talks, calling Russian forces a "clear and present danger" for Ukraine.

After his meeting with Putin in Moscow, Orban also suggested a solution was possible.

"The situation is serious, the differences are substantial," Orban told the press conference with Putin. "But the existing differences in positions are bridgeable."

Orban, one of Putin's few allies among NATO and EU leaders, made the trip to Moscow in defiance of opposition parties who said it went against the country's national interests.

'Toughest sanctions ever'

Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi also urged "a de-escalation of tensions" in a call with Putin on Tuesday.

Putin said that French President Emmanuel Macron -- who spoke to the Russian leader for the second time in four days on Monday -- could come to Moscow for talks "in the near future".

Western leaders have repeatedly warned of "severe consequences" if Russia does invade,

including wide-ranging and damaging economic sanctions.

Britain and the United States said Monday they were looking at targeting people in Putin's inner circle, including powerful business allies.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss told parliament that the government was putting through "the toughest sanctions regime against Russia we've ever had".

"Those in and around the Kremlin will have nowhere to hide," she said.

The United States and Britain have been at the forefront in warning of an invasion and have sent new shipments of weapons to shore up the Ukrainian military.

Zelensky said Kyiv was enjoying its biggest diplomatic and military support since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.

"Everyone is coming to us. It is very important," Zelensky told parliament.

The Ukrainian leader announced plans to add 100,000 personnel to the armed forces over three years and end conscription, as Kyiv looks to professionalise its forces.

Ukraine's military has been transformed with Western support over the past eight years, from a threadbare outfit that relied on volunteer fighters to a battle-hardened force.

Ukraine has been battling Moscow-backed insurgencies in two separatist regions since 2014, with more than 13,000 people killed in the conflict.

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