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Lavrov Walks Out of G20 Talks as West Presses Moscow on Ukraine

By Shaun Tandon for AFP

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A police officer walks past a G20 sign in Nusa Dua, Bali, Indonesia, Thursday, July 7, 2022. **AP Photo/Dita Alangkara/TASS**

Russia's top diplomat stormed out of talks with G20 foreign ministers meeting in Indonesia on Friday as Western powers criticized Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine.

Washington and allies condemned Russia's assault ahead of the meeting before Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov faced what U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called a barrage of Western criticism at the closed-door talks.

"What we've heard today already is a strong chorus from around the world... about the need for the aggression to end," Blinken said from the meeting on the resort island of Bali.

Blinken and Lavrov had joined colleagues for day-long talks in their first meeting since the outbreak of war, with the host immediately telling them the conflict must end through

negotiations.

But Lavrov walked out of a morning session as German counterpart Annalena Baerbock criticized Moscow over its invasion, diplomats said.

He also left an afternoon session before Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba addressed the ministers virtually and was not present as Blinken condemned Russia.

"Our Western partners are trying to avoid talking about global economic issues," Lavrov told reporters outside the Mulia hotel. "From the moment they speak, they launch into fevered criticism of Russia."

Blinken shunned a meeting with Lavrov and instead accused Russia of triggering a global food crisis, demanding Moscow allow grain shipments out of war-battered Ukraine.

"To our Russian colleagues: Ukraine is not your country. Its grain is not your grain. Why are you blocking the ports? You should let the grain out," Blinken said in the closed-door talks, according to a Western official present.

Lavrov earlier told reporters he would not "go running" after Washington for talks.

"It was not us who abandoned contact, it was the United States," he said.

Abe killing overshadows meet

Before the meeting, Blinken met his French and German counterparts and a senior British official to discuss "Russia's unprovoked and unjustifiable war of choice" in Ukraine, the State Department said in a statement.

But the gathering was soon overshadowed by the killing of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at a campaign event on Friday.

After the shooting, Blinken voiced alarm over the attack on a longtime ally of Washington and Japan's longest-serving premier, calling it a "very sad moment."

Before the news of the attack emerged, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi addressed the Ukraine war in a speech to the ministers including Lavrov.

"It is our responsibility to end the war sooner than later and settle our differences at the negotiating table, not the battlefield," Marsudi said.

No family photo

A U.S. official indicated Washington did not want to embarrass Indonesia at the meeting by walking out on Lavrov.

But there will be no family photo of the G20 ministers as is customary, an Indonesian government official told AFP.

The hosts have addressed U.S. concerns about Lavrov attending in part by inviting Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelensky to the G20 summit in November.

In his address, Kuleba told ministers to "remember about 344 families who have lost their children when listening to Russian lies."

"The minister of the country responsible for their deaths appears in front of you today to share his thoughts on how Russia views cooperation in our globalized world," he added.

Blinken arrived at the Mulia hotel on Friday where he could be seen talking with South Africa's foreign minister before entering the same room as Lavrov, who he last met in January.

Russia's top diplomat was seated between the Saudi Arabian and Mexican foreign ministers as the meeting began.

British FM leaves

Blinken's efforts to have a powerful Western stance against Russia at the meeting were diluted after British Foreign Minister Liz Truss pulled out following Prime Minister Boris Johnson's resignation as leader of his party on Thursday.

She flew out of Indonesia on Friday morning and was replaced by former British ambassador to the European Union Sir Tim Barrow, a British official told AFP.

While in Bali, Blinken will also seek to reopen dialogue with Beijing in talks on Saturday with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, the first in months after tensions became strained over issues including Taiwan.

The meeting comes as U.S. President Joe Biden voices hope for a conversation in the coming weeks with Chinese President Xi Jinping, with whom he last spoke in March.

Lavrov met Wang on Thursday to discuss Russia's invasion, which Moscow says it launched to stop Ukraine from joining the NATO military alliance.

The United States has condemned Beijing's support for Russia, and Blinken is expected to reiterate those warnings in talks with Wang.

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