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South African Military Delegation in Moscow for 'Combat Readiness' Talks

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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. **Rajesh Jantilal / AFP**

The commander of South Africa's ground forces is in Moscow for talks on improving combat readiness, Russian news agencies said Monday, citing Russia's Defense Ministry.

Lieutenant General Lawrence Mbatha is heading a delegation that met his Russian colleague, Colonel General Oleg Salyukov, according to the state-run TASS news agency.

The two discussed "issues relating to military cooperation and interaction aimed at the implementation of projects aimed at improving the combat readiness of the armed forces of both countries," Russia's Defense Ministry said.

The South African delegation is expected to visit the Russian ground forces' training sites and defense industry enterprises, the news agency added.

Mbatha's unannounced visit to Moscow comes days after the United States accused South Africa of secretly providing arms to Russia.

South Africa denied the charge and announced an independent inquiry into the claims Thursday.

On Friday, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa held phone talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin where both leaders agreed to "intensify mutually beneficial ties in various fields."

Ramaphosa meanwhile reiterated Pretoria's neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in a statement Monday.

Despite the series of diplomatic overtures, South African media cited government sources saying this month that Pretoria would have "no choice" but to arrest Putin on an International Criminal Court warrant if he attended the BRICS summit in August.

AFP contributed reporting.

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