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Putin Says Free Grain Exports to Africa to Begin in 'Weeks'

By AFP

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Sergei Guneev, RIA Novosti / kremlin.ru

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Monday that Moscow is just weeks away from supplying free grain to six African countries after scrapping a deal allowing Ukrainian food exports through the Black Sea.

His comments during a press conference with Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi came hours after Russian forces pounded one of Ukraine's key grain-exporting hubs overnight with a swarm of attack drones.

Erdogan told Putin that Turkey and the United Nations had prepared new proposals aimed at addressing Russia's problems with the deal, adding that he hoped to reach a workable solution "soon."

But Putin reiterated that Russia would only return to the landmark accord when its demands

were met and instead gave details of the plan for shipments to Africa.

"We are close to completing agreements with six African states, where we intend to supply foodstuffs for free and even carry out delivery and logistics for free," Putin said.

"Deliveries will begin in the next couple of weeks."

The UN and Turkey-brokered deal, which aimed to ensure safe navigation for civilian ships through the Black Sea, collapsed after Russia pulled out in July.

Tensions have built in the region since, with Russia mounting attacks on Ukrainian export hubs and Kyiv's forces targeting Moscow's naval ports and warships.

Drone barrage

Earlier on Monday, Russia said it destroyed four U.S.-made Ukrainian military boats carrying troops in the Black Sea en route to the Crimean peninsula, annexed by Moscow in 2014.

In Sochi, Erdogan said there is no alternative to the original grain deal and that Ankara was working with the United Nations on addressing complaints levied by Russia, which claims its fertilizer exports are being hampered by Western sanctions.

"We have prepared a new proposal package in consultation with the UN. I believe that it is possible to get results. I believe that a solution that will meet Turkey's expectations will be reached soon," Erdogan said.

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Since the deal collapsed, Moscow has repeatedly attacked Ukrainian ports in what Kyiv says is a cynical attempt to damage its exports and undermine global food security.

The Russian drone attack on Monday hit a grain export hub on the Danube River, Ukrainian officials said, adding that warehouses and agricultural equipment were damaged.

The regional governor Oleh Kiper announced that air defense systems had downed 17 drones.

Ukraine's foreign ministry claimed Monday that some of the drones in the attack had fallen on Romanian territory, although Bucharest "categorically" denied the claim.

While most fighting during Russia's offensive has taken place within Ukraine's borders, Kyiv has occasionally claimed Russian munitions have fallen into European countries, claims that its NATO allies have largely dismissed.

"At no time did the means of attack used by the Russian Federation pose a direct military threat to Romania's national territory or territorial waters," the Romanian defense ministry said.

Ukraine's military said Russia had used Iranian-made Shahed drones in the "massive"

overnight attack.

Ukraine's attack 'a failure'

The strikes come a day after Ukraine fought off a barrage of Russian drones in the same region, with Moscow's army claiming the assaults targeted fuel storage facilities in the nearby port of Reni.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov meanwhile announced on Monday he had handed in his resignation to parliament after President Volodymyr Zelensky called for "new approaches" to face Russia's offensive.

Zelensky's decision to remove Reznikov comes after several corruption scandals rocked the defense ministry, and the Ukrainian leader removed senior military recruitment officials across the country.

"It was an honor to serve the Ukrainian people and work for the (Ukrainian army) for the last 22 months, the toughest period of Ukraine's modern history," he added.

His departure comes during a highly-scrutinized Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south and east of the country, which officials said Monday had made limited progress.

But Putin in Sochi on Monday claimed that the counteroffensive to retake Ukrainian land lost to Moscow had ultimately been unsuccessful.

"It is not that it is stalling. It is a failure," Putin said. "At least today this is what it looks like. Let's see what happens next."

Ukraine's Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar earlier on Monday had said Russian forces were "on the defensive in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson sectors," referring to two southern regions that Moscow claimed to have annexed last year.

She added that Ukrainian forces had also captured three square kilometers (around one square mile) near Bakhmut, a town in the east captured by Russia this May.

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