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Ukraine Demands Zelensky-Putin Meeting, Russia Proposes Brief Truces in Latest Talks

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The third round of Russian-Ukrainian peace talks at Çırağan Palace in Istanbul, Turkey. **Alexander Ryumin / TASS**

Ukraine on Wednesday proposed direct talks within weeks between its President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russia's Vladimir Putin while Moscow tempered prospects for progress at a fresh round of talks in Istanbul on Wednesday.

A Russian negotiator said his country agreed to the latest in a series of prisoner exchanges with Ukraine and proposed brief ceasefires allowing dead and wounded soldiers to be recovered.

Host country Turkey urged steps towards a lasting ceasefire and peace deal, but the Kremlin played down any expectations of a breakthrough after three and a half years of war.

Ukraine's lead negotiator, Rustem Umerov, told reporters: "Priority number one is to

organize the meeting of the leaders, of presidents," in comments after the talks.

He said Kyiv had proposed to hold the talks by the end of August, with U.S. President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also participating.

Moscow's lead negotiator Vladimir Medinsky told reporters the sides had lengthy discussions but added: "The positions are quite distant. We agreed to continue contacts."

He said both countries agreed to exchange 1,200 prisoners of war each and that Moscow offered to hand Kyiv the bodies of 3,000 killed soldiers.

"We once again proposed to the Ukrainian side... to establish short 24- to 48-hour ceasefires on the line of contact, so that medical teams are able to collect the wounded and so that commanders can come take the bodies of their soldiers," he added.

Putin last month called Russian and Ukrainian demands for peace remain "absolutely contradictory," but noted that the goal of ongoing talks was to "bring these positions together."

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Trump last week gave Russia 50 days to end the war or face sanctions, but the Kremlin has not indicated it is willing to compromise.

Moscow had sought to downplay expectations ahead of Wednesday's talks. Peskov told reporters earlier this week that it would be "misguided" to expect a breakthrough or set a timeline for a peace deal, citing "many factors" complicating the negotiations.

And on Tuesday, Peskov continued to dial back expectations, saying that "Nobody expects an easy path. Naturally, it will be a very difficult conversation. [Ukraine's and Russia's peace proposals] are diametrically opposed to one another."

Zelensky, meanwhile, has reiterated his willingness to meet one-on-one with Putin. The Kremlin has so far rejected the idea, saying Ukrainian law currently forbids negotiations with Putin under a 2022 decree signed by Zelensky.

Russia and Ukraine have held two rounds of direct peace talks this year, the first on May 16 and the second on June 2.

While those discussions resulted in major prisoner exchanges, no progress has been made toward a broader ceasefire or an end to Russia's full-scale invasion, which Putin launched in February 2022.

AFP contributed reporting.

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