

**War in Ukraine**

## Russia and Ukraine talks fail to yield progress

Kyiv says Moscow would not discuss Ukraine's status at meeting of foreign ministers in Turkey



Ukrainian forces evacuate civilians from Irpin, near Kyiv, as Russian troops bomb the city © Mykhaylo Palinchak/SOPA Images v

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Russia rebuffed Ukraine's proposals for a temporary ceasefire and humanitarian aid for the besieged city of Mariupol at high-level talks that made little progress on Thursday.

Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister, said that at a 90-minute meeting with Sergei Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, he had insisted on a 24-hour pause in fighting and help for the devastated port city on the Sea of Azov.

"Unfortunately, FM Lavrov seemed to have come to talk, not to decide," Kuleba said on Twitter. "I hope he will convey Ukraine's requests back in Moscow."

The talks in the Turkish city of Antalya were the most senior interaction between Moscow and Kyiv since Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion on February 24 — and they coincided with worsening conditions in Mariupol.

People in the city, which had a population of more than 400,000 before the war, have been living in appalling conditions for more than a week after basic services including light, heating and water were knocked out by Russia's bombardment.

Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, accused Russia of "war crimes" after missiles destroyed a Mariupol children's hospital on Wednesday. The attack killed three people including a little girl and injured 17 others, an assistant to the city's mayor told the Financial Times.

A field worker with the International Committee of the Red Cross in the city said that people were starting "to attack each other for food" in remarks sent to journalists by the humanitarian group. Russian forces, which have encircled the city for days, took control of several neighbourhoods inside it, Moscow said.

In the talks, Kuleba said he had responded to Russia's demand for Ukraine's future neutrality with a proposal that would be backed by security guarantees from world powers, but that Lavrov would not discuss the issues.

The Russian foreign minister told reporters: "We want Ukraine to stay neutral, President Putin said that on many occasions."

He added: "We are ready to talk about security guarantees for the Ukrainian state along with security guarantees for the European states and of course for the security of Russia."

Lavrov also blamed the west for using Kyiv to threaten Moscow while telling his Ukrainian counterpart that Putin may enter negotiations if "specific" proposals were on the table.

Kuleba said: "The list of demands that Russia put together and forwarded to Ukraine – it is not a negotiation position, it is really an ultimatum," he said after the talks, adding: "We shall not surrender".

The meeting came after more than two weeks of war in which Russia's faltering campaign has laid waste to urban areas but remains well short of its main objectives, with the biggest cities still under Ukrainian control and its skies contested. More than 2.1mn civilians have fled the country.

Lavrov claimed that Russia "did not attack Ukraine", while adding that everything was "going according to plan" in his country's military operation.

"We just explained to Ukraine many times that a situation had arisen which posed a direct threat to Russia," he said. "Despite the fact that we talked about this over many years . . . no one listened to our appeals and exhortations."

Western officials warned that Moscow might resort to more devastating

unconventional weapons as it grew increasingly desperate over the war.

After his negotiations with Kuleba, Lavrov repeated Moscow's claims that biological weapons were developed by Ukraine with US support. The White House has said the allegations are "preposterous" as it warned that Moscow might use the claims in a "false-flag" attack in Ukraine.



Before the talks Kuleba said Kyiv wanted a ceasefire, the liberation of territories under Russian control and humanitarian relief for its civilians.

In recent days, Moscow has subtly softened its language around regime change in Kyiv. But fundamental differences on other issues, including Russia's territorial claims on parts of Ukraine, still make the prospects of a substantial breakthrough low.

For the third successive day, Ukraine proposed six humanitarian corridors to take people out of Mariupol as well as Volnovakha, Izyum and other besieged cities into "safe cities of our free Ukraine", as it urged Russia to uphold a promised ceasefire.

Zelensky said that on Wednesday Ukraine had managed to organise evacuations from the eastern city of Sumy, from cities and towns under Russian siege in the Kyiv region and from Enerhodar, site of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. In total, about 35,000 people had been rescued, he added.

But repeated attempts to evacuate civilians from some of the hardest-hit cities have

largely failed, with Russia and Ukraine trading accusations of ceasefire violations.

“Ukraine has already received a significant amount of humanitarian aid, but we cannot deliver it, and people are dying,” Olga Stefanishyna, Ukraine’s deputy prime minister, told the FT on Thursday. “People are [being] used as human shields.”

Russian and Ukrainian military claims cannot be independently verified.

While fighting continues on the outskirts of Kyiv across three fronts, western officials say a huge armoured column to the north-west of the capital has made little progress for more than a week.

British defence officials said on Thursday that it was “suffering continued losses” and that Russia had markedly decreased its air activity in recent days, probably as a result of “the unexpected effectiveness” of Ukrainian defences.

Western officials have said Russia is using brutal and indiscriminate weapons in urban areas, including cluster munitions. The UK’s Ministry of Defence said on Wednesday that Russia had confirmed its use of a thermobaric weapon in Ukraine, which creates “incendiary and blast effects” that have a “devastating impact”.

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