

Africa needs grain imports, key states say ahead of Putin talks

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Key African states stressed the need for grain imports to tackle food insecurity as Russian President Vladimir Putin prepares to discuss with the continent's leaders the fate of a deal allowing the safe Black Sea export of food and fertiliser from Ukraine.



Commercial vessels wait to pass the Bosphorus strait off the shores of Yenikapi during a misty morning in Istanbul, Turkey. Source: Reuters/Umit Bektas

Putin said on Tuesday, 13 June, that Russia was considering quitting the Black Sea grain initiative - brokered by the United Nations and Turkey in July last year - because its own grain and fertiliser shipments still face obstacles.

The pact could expire on 17 July.

A delegation of African leaders is due to visit both Ukraine and Russia from this weekend in a push to end Russia's 16-month-long war, and Putin has said he plans to use the occasion to raise the matter.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa believes Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy are aligned with him

on the "importance of grain deliveries to Africa for the alleviation of food insecurity", said Ramaphosa's spokesperson Vincent Magwenya.

"We are, therefore, not aware of any threats to pull out of the grain deal," Magwenya told Reuters on Wednesday.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday that Moscow had not yet made a decision on withdrawing.

Russia has issued a list of demands it wants met, including the resumption of its Black Sea ammonia exports and reconnection of the Russian Agricultural Bank to the Swift payment system.



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'Devastating toll'

While food and fertiliser exports do not fall under the West's tough sanctions imposed on Russia over the war, Moscow says restrictions on payments, logistics and insurance create barriers.

Putin also complained that under the deal "almost nothing goes to African countries" and said Moscow is ready to supply grain for free to the world's poorest countries.

The United Nations has long said the Black Sea grain deal is a commercial enterprise but that it benefits poorer countries by helping lower food prices globally.

Zambia's foreign minister Stanley Kakubo said in a statement on Wednesday that the war in Ukraine and conflict in Sudan had "taken a devastating toll on African communities, resulting in the loss of life, and food insecurity, due to the rising costs of grain and fertiliser".

According to UN data, more than 31 million tonnes of grain have been exported under the pact, with 43% of that to developing countries. More than 625,000 tonnes of grain has been shipped by the UN World Food Programme for aid operations.

The Black Sea grain deal was initially brokered for 120 days. Russia has agreed to extend it three times but warned on Wednesday that its "goodwill" cannot last forever.

Not all African states were worried, however.

"If it's true that we would starve if that grain deal is disrupted, why is it that it's the West crying more than us Africans? They are crying crocodile tears," Uganda's state minister for foreign affairs, Okello Oryem, told Reuters.

He added that Uganda would have no qualms about accepting free grain from Russia.