



# What next for the Russia-Ukraine grain deal?



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## INTRODUCTION

**R**ussia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine initially focused geopolitical minds on whether the capital Kyiv would fall and if the Zelensky government would survive.

However, another consequence of the largest conflict in Europe since the Second World War was a Russian naval blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, a decision that ensured the effects of the war would reverberate around the globe. Ukraine and Russia are the world's two main breadbaskets, supplying more than a quarter of the planet's wheat.<sup>1</sup> At least 25 countries in Africa import more than one-third of their grain from these countries, with about 15 importing over half.

In July 2022, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was agreed following months of negotiation brokered by the UN and Türkiye to help ease a global food crisis following the invasion. That neither of the warring parties was in the room at the same time highlighted the fragility of the agreement, which the UK-based charity the International Rescue Committee called a "lifeline for the 79 countries and 349 million people on the front line of food insecurity."<sup>2</sup> In its almost a year-

long existence, the initiative allowed almost 33 million tons of grain (a third less than pre-war levels) and food staples to move via Black Sea ports to 45 countries, with developing nations receiving the largest share of exports. The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, described the deal as "a beacon of hope, a beacon of possibility, a beacon of relief."<sup>3</sup> Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a key player in bringing about the deal, described it as a "humanitarian corridor" and a "bridge for peace."<sup>4</sup>

However, having regularly threatened to pull out of the deal when it was renewed every three months, Russia finally quit on July 17. Moscow said it was not getting what it wanted from the arrangement, and claimed that Russia's Federal Security Service had found traces of explosives on a ship traveling from Türkiye to the Russian port of Rostov-on-Don to pick up grain.<sup>5</sup> The end of the deal was quickly followed by three consecutive nights of attacks on Ukrainian ports, including the country's largest, Odessa, which had been largely untouched since the start of the invasion. More than 60,000 tons of grain were reported destroyed within a week.<sup>6</sup> After nine days of attacks, Ukrainian officials accused Russia of having hit 26 port facilities and five civilian vessels, destroying



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180,000 tons of grain.<sup>7</sup> Global grain prices jumped by 9 percent, the highest in a decade, and according to the International Monetary Fund could increase by up to 15 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Of particular concern for those worried about wider escalation of the conflict were Russian strikes against Ukrainian port facilities at Izmail on the River Danube, barely 200 meters from NATO member state Romania — the border between the two countries runs down the middle of the river.<sup>9</sup> The Danube has been increasingly developed as an alternative trade route for Ukraine through central Europe, with 2 million tons of grain making it through in the past 12 months, compared with 600,000 tons the year before. With the deal currently dead, Ukrainian grain exports by river, truck and rail are predicted to fall to about 2.5 million tons per month.<sup>10</sup> Chicago wheat prices rose by nearly 5 percent following the Izmail attack.<sup>11</sup>

The US representative to the UN Security Council, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, has said that "Russia is waging war on the world's food supply."<sup>12</sup> To put the challenge of the food crisis into perspective, as many as 828 million people globally go to bed hungry every night,<sup>13</sup> and the number facing acute food insecurity has soared from 135 million

**In July, Russia pulled out of a UN-brokered deal to transport Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea. AFP**

to 345 million since 2019. A total of 49 million people in 49 countries are teetering on the edge of famine. Yet when the UN secretary-general wrote a private letter to the Kremlin, urging Russia to keep the deal alive, he did not even get a reply.<sup>14</sup>

Rises in price and interruptions in grain deliveries could have a massive impact on economically fragile countries in the Middle East and North Africa that rely on imports. Although this equation is partially informed by each country's level of wheat reserves, an Egyptian baker interviewed predicted starkly that "if they don't find a solution soonest, things will be very difficult."<sup>15</sup> Fifty-seven percent of grain from the Black Sea initiative previously went to 14 countries currently defined as most threatened with starvation, including Afghanistan, Sudan, Yemen and the war-hit Horn of Africa. Somalia receives more than 90 percent of its grain from Ukraine and Russia, and about 1.8 million children under 5 are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in the drought-stricken country this year. Lebanon imports over half of its wheat from Ukraine. A break in grain supply, coupled with Lebanon's worst economic crisis in a century, will deepen food insecurity in a country where 46 percent of families worry about not





*Continued strikes on Ukraine's food infrastructure imperil any ability to return to the pre-war status quo*

'Moscow is ready to return without delay to the grain deal, but after the conditions for Russia are fulfilled,' says Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov. AFP



having enough to eat. Lebanon now has the highest food price inflation in the world, a staggering 352 percent. At the same time, millions of Lebanese have been classified as experiencing crisis or emergency levels of food consumption gaps.

The year-old Black Sea deal had allowed 1,000 ships to export food products from Ukraine by sea, including 80 percent of the grain going to the World Food Programme. "What we have to do now is to look elsewhere (for grain), of course," Carl Skau, the organization's deputy executive director, told Associated Press. "We don't know exactly where the market will land, but there might well be an increase in food prices." Citing budget cuts, the WFP has started reducing monthly cash aid for 120,000 Syrian refugees living in two camps in Jordan. The agency has said it will gradually cut off 50,000 refugees in Jordan from its assistance altogether.<sup>16</sup>

## WHAT NEXT?

In July, Thomas-Greenfield, US ambassador to the UN, said that if Russia wants to get its own fertilizer to global markets and make agricultural transactions, "they're going to have to return to this deal."<sup>17</sup> The outcry against the Russia decision has been widespread. Pope Francis issued an "appeal to my brothers, the authorities of the Russian Federation, so that the Black Sea initiative may be resumed and grain may be transported safely."<sup>18</sup> Egypt's President

**Roughly 57% of food products exported from Ukraine in the past year went to developing nations.**  
AFP

Abdel Fattah El-Sisi said it was "essential" that the deal be revived and called for an urgent solution to supply the poorest African countries.<sup>19</sup> The African Union has also called for the deal to be reinstated urgently. "The problem of grains and fertilizers concerns everyone," Comoros President Azali Assoumani, who heads the 55-nation umbrella group, told Russian state newswire RIA Novosti.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Korir SingOei, the top civil servant in Kenya's foreign affairs ministry, said in a tweet that "the decision by Russia to exit the Black Sea Grain Initiative is a stab in the back at global food security prices and disproportionately impacts countries in the Horn of Africa already impacted by drought."<sup>21</sup> South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor reassured his country that "we are also working hard to persuade the Russian side to address the Black Sea grain deal and interacting with all the relevant parties to see whether we can find a solution to ensure an opening of the Black Sea initiative."<sup>22</sup>

In response to this chorus of concern, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that "Moscow is ready to return without delay to the grain deal, but after the conditions for Russia are fulfilled."<sup>23</sup> However, actions speak louder than words, and the pummeling of Ukraine's agricultural infrastructure is clear for all to see.

Why is Russia keen to see the deal changed? Before the war the country was a world leader

in exporting fertilizer, something that it says has been curtailed by Western-led sanctions despite the promises of the original grain deal. Moscow would return to the deal "as soon as the West actually fulfills all the obligations to Russia," Russian President Vladimir Putin told Erdogan in a phone call.<sup>24</sup> The Russian leader cited restrictions on payments, logistics and insurance as being barriers to Russian shipments. Meanwhile, Moscow is attempting to placate concerned African countries with solutions of its own to the hunger crisis. Putin said in July that "Russia will continue its energetic efforts to provide supplies of grain, food products, fertilizers and other goods to Africa."<sup>25</sup> At the recent Russia-Africa summit, Moscow offered between 25,000 and 50,000 tons of grain free to Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, the Central African Republic and Eritrea.<sup>26</sup>

Much hope is being placed on Putin's planned visit to Turkiye in August. Erdogan was a key player in bringing about the first deal and may be best placed to restore it. However, it is not obvious what exact policy change or commitments Moscow can claim to have won in order to make the political decision to return to the agreement. Another potential arena for hope could be the Saudi-hosted, Ukrainian-organized peace summit in early August in Jeddah, which will seek to start negotiations over the conflict and potentially could see the Black Sea initiative addressed as a key

confidence-building starting point.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond hope for negotiations there is talk from some quarters that the deal could be restarted without Russia. Some Ukrainian figures say they would like to see the world call Moscow's bluff by sending grain ships along a designated corridor, basically daring Russia to attack internationally flagged civilian vessels.<sup>28</sup> However, the continued strikes on Ukraine's food infrastructure imperil any ability to return to the pre-war status quo. By some estimates Ukraine's grain export capacity could drop by a further 50 percent, and there are concerns over whether Ukraine has the manpower to plant and harvest crops in the years ahead, not to mention the issues of land mines and the contamination of unexploded munitions across the country. Another debate swirls around whether the Russian withdrawal from the grain deal constitutes a war crime or a crime against humanity under international criminal law, given the intentional use of "starvation of civilians as a method of warfare."<sup>29</sup>

Last year's grain deal was a beacon of hope, both in mitigating a looming global hunger crisis and showing that there was an avenue, no matter how fragile, for a diplomatic dialogue as opposed to a dialogue of violence between the two sides. Restoring the agreement and strengthening its mandate is in the interest of literally hundreds of millions of people around the world.



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## ARAB NEWS

