

World

US to send Ukraine controversial cluster munitions

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Summary

Cluster bombs part of \$800 million US military aid package

Ukraine's Zelenskiy visits NATO member capitals before summit

UN aid chief says Russia shouldn't 'chuck away' grains deal

July 7 (Reuters) - The United States announced on Friday that it would supply Ukraine with widely banned cluster munitions for its counteroffensive against occupying Russian forces, and NATO's leader said the military alliance would unite at a summit next week on how to bring Ukraine closer to joining.

Rights groups and the United Nations secretary-general questioned Washington's decision on the munitions, part of an \$800 million security package that brings total U.S. military aid to more than \$40 billion since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, who describes the conflict as a "special military operation" to protect Russian security, has said the U.S. and its allies were fighting an expanding proxy war.

The cluster munitions "will deliver in a time frame that is relevant for the counteroffensive," a Pentagon official told reporters.

Cluster munitions are prohibited by more than 100 countries. Russia, Ukraine and the United States have not signed on to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans production, stockpiling, use and transfer of the weapons.

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They typically release large numbers of smaller bomblets that can kill indiscriminately over a wide area. Those that fail to explode pose a danger for decades after a conflict ends.

"Ukraine has provided written assurances that it is going to use these in a very careful way" to minimize risks to civilians, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

U.S. President Joe Biden described the decision on cluster bombs as difficult but said Ukraine needed them.

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BOTH SIDES SHOULD STOP USING CLUSTER BOMBS -HRW

Human Rights Watch has accused Russian and Ukrainian forces of using cluster munitions, which have killed civilians.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov criticized the transfer of these weapons to Ukraine by the U.S.

"The cruelty and cynicism with which Washington has approached the issue of transferring lethal weapons to Kyiv is striking," TASS news agency on Friday quoted Antonov as saying.

"Now, by the fault of the US, there will be a risk for many years that innocent civilians will be blown up by submunitions that have failed."

Ukraine says it has taken back some villages in southern Ukraine since the counteroffensive began in early June, but that it lacks the firepower and air cover to make faster progress.

Reuters could not independently verify the battlefield situation.



Ukrainian military serviceman Igor Ovcharruck holds a defused cluster bomb from an MSLR missile, among a display of pieces of rockets used by Russian army, that a Ukrainian munitions expert said did not explode on impact, in the region of Kharkiv, Ukraine, October 21, 2022.

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"It's too early to judge how the counteroffensive is going one way or the other because we're at the beginning of the middle," Colin Kahl, the U.S. under secretary of defense for policy, told reporters.

ZELENSKIY TOURS NATO COUNTRIES

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy visited the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Turkey a day after talks in Bulgaria to drum up support for NATO membership before the alliance's July 11-12 summit.

Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan said after meeting Zelenskiy that Ukraine deserved NATO membership and that Ankara would continue working on a negotiated end to the war.

In Prague, Zelenskiy won a pledge of support for Ukraine to join NATO "as soon as the war is over", and in Sofia secured backing for membership "as soon as conditions allow."

North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg reaffirmed his view that Ukraine would become a member.

"Our summit will send a clear message: NATO stands united, and Russia's aggression will not pay," Stoltenberg said at a news conference in Brussels.

It remained unclear, however, what Ukraine will be offered next week at the summit in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. The alliance is divided over how fast Ukraine should move towards membership, and some countries are wary of any step that might take NATO closer to war with Russia.

Biden, in an excerpt of a CNN interview that aired on Friday, underscored the point. "I don't think there is unanimity in NATO" about Ukraine joining now, he said.

Zelenskiy has acknowledged that Kyiv is unlikely to be able to join NATO while at war with Russia. Putin has threatened unspecified action if Ukraine joins NATO.

UN WARNS RUSSIA ON GRAINS DEAL

At the United Nations, aid chief Martin Griffiths warned Russia that it should not "chuck away" an agreement it made a year ago on the safe wartime passage of agricultural exports, known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

If Russia does not agree to extend the deal that allows export of grain and fertilizer from Ukrainian ports, it is unlikely Western states will continue cooperating with U.N. officials helping Moscow with its exports, Griffiths told reporters.

Russia has threatened to quit the deal, which expires on July 17, because several demands to export its own grain and fertilizer have not been met. The last three ships traveling under the deal are loading cargoes at the Ukrainian port of Odesa and are likely to depart on Monday.

The United Nations and Turkey brokered the deal with Russia and Ukraine in July 2022 to help tackle a global food crisis worsened by Moscow's invasion of its neighbor and blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports.

Reporting by Robert Muller and Jason Hovet in Prague; Pavel Polityuk and Olena Harmash in Kyiv, Mike Stone, Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali in Washington and Michelle Nichols at the United Nations; writing by Grant McCool; editing by Diane Craft and David Gregorio