

Ukraine says Black Sea grain corridor will continue

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said on Monday October 31st that Ukraine would continue to export grain from the Black Sea ports of Odesa, Chornomorsk and Yuzhne as part of a deal agreed in July between Ukraine, the UN, Turkey and Russia, despite Russia suspending the agreement and warning that vessels transiting the corridor “did so at their own risk”.

Zelenskiy made his comments following talks with Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala. “On our side, we are continuing with the grain initiative because we understand what we offer the world. We offer stability on the food production market,” Zelenskiy told a joint news conference alongside Fiala.

Zelenskiy said he believed that Russia had left the agreement, notwithstanding Russian President Putin’s claim that it had only “suspended” its participation. Russia said on Monday October 31st that it was “unacceptable” for shipping to pass through a Black Sea security corridor as Ukraine was using it to “conduct military operations against the Russian Federation”. The comments related to Russia’s assertion that Ukraine had undertaken drone attacks in Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014 but still claimed as Ukrainian territory by Ukraine.

“The movement of ships along the security corridor is unacceptable since the Ukrainian leadership and the command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine use it to conduct military operations against the Russian Federation,” the Russian defence ministry said in a statement, adding that “under the current conditions, there can be no question of guaranteeing the security of any object in the indicated direction until the Ukrainian side accepts additional obligations not to use this route for military purposes.”

Russia has accused Ukraine of using protected grain ships to launch the attack. On Monday UN aid director Martin Griffiths said that this could not have been the case since “none were in the corridor on the night of the 29th of October when the reported attacks took place, and no vessel reported an incident over the weekend.” Meanwhile, two civilian Ukraine tugboats were hit by Russian fire at the port of Ochakiv, Ukraine on Monday, according to Ukrainian Operational Command South. The Russian strikes were the first hits on civilian vessels reported since the signing of the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Two were reported dead as a result of the strikes.

A spokesman for Ukraine's Operational Command South said on Monday that "as a result of an attack on two port civilian tugboats that were involved in the transportation of grain barges, a fire broke out,

[and]

control over the vessels was lost. Two crew members were killed, one more was rescued with injuries, the fate of another is unknown." It was not immediately clear whether the strikes on the tugboats were intentional or merely the result of indiscriminate artillery fire. Ochakiv is not covered by the terms of the Grain Initiative and it has been attacked repeatedly since the invasion commenced in February. Though Russia is in possession of limited numbers of guided missiles and attack drones, it relies on imprecise artillery bombardment for most strikes along the front line, including past attacks on Ochakiv's grain elevator and port area.

During the early months of the invasion Russian forces repeatedly struck merchant ships, while Russia's naval forces enforced a months-long blockade on civilian shipping to and from Ukrainian ports.

Russia has effectively stated that it would not be reinstating such a blockade, although one reason for this could well be that Russia no longer has the military capability so to do.

Thirteen ships were reported to have transited the corridor in Black Sea as of near midnight local time October 31st.