

India's Modi makes visit to Ukraine, urges Zelensky to hold peace talks

Prime minister's trip comes after controversial July stop in Moscow

BY GERRY SHIH

A month after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a controversial trip to Moscow, he urged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in a meeting in Kyiv on Friday to hold direct talks with Russia on ending the Ukraine war.

Zelensky had criticized Modi's visit to Moscow on July 8, which produced images of the Indian leader warmly embracing Russian President Vladimir Putin just hours after a Russian missile attack on a children's hospital in Kyiv killed dozens of people.

But on Friday, Zelensky and Indian officials struck a conciliatory tone as Modi presented himself on his first trip to Ukraine as a neutral peacemaker and a leader with international clout. Modi urged Zelensky to sit for dialogue with Putin and added that he had "looked [Putin] in the eye" and made a similar entreaty for talks with Zelensky.

"I want to assure you that India is ready to play an active role in any efforts toward peace," Modi said. "I would want all of us to see the sun of peace rise at the earliest."

Modi noted that he and Zelensky had paid homage to children killed in the conflict, in an oblique reference to the Russian missile attack that coincided with his Moscow visit. "My heart is heavy after I saw the place where children were martyred," Modi said.

In response, Zelensky hailed the meeting as "historic" and called Modi's visit "truly a sign of friendship." On X, Zelensky noted that he and Modi had "honored the memory of the children whose lives were taken by Russian aggression."

At the time, Zelensky had said it was "a huge disappointment and a devastating blow to peace efforts to see the leader of the world's largest democracy hug the world's most bloody criminal in Moscow on such a day."

Since the full-blown war erupted in February 2022, Ukrainian officials have urged India to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and take a stronger stand against Russia, a longtime partner of India. Zelensky has

also asked Modi to support his "peace summit" framework, which kicked off in June but was met with tepid support from Global South countries, including India.

Indian officials, who have largely avoided directly criticizing Russia, counter that India has consistently called for an end to fighting and it would be difficult for India to stop purchasing Russian weapons and oil, which are crucial for the country's growing defense needs and its economy.

Ukraine respected India's status as a large democracy and a powerful country, "but now it is necessary to say who is the aggressor, who is the victim, who is breaking international law," Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, said in an interview with the India Today television channel that aired shortly before the start of the leaders' summit. "We will find out."

S. Jaishankar, India's top diplomat, described Friday's meeting as a constructive, "very back and forth discussion," and told reporters that Modi explained to Zelensky India's thinking on its continued purchases of Russian oil. In July, India overtook China as the world's top buyer of Rus-



ROMAN PILIPEY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on Friday. During his visit, Modi said "India is ready to play an active role in any efforts toward peace."

sian oil and purchased more than 2 million barrels a day, according to Reuters.

India has argued that by purchasing Russian oil at a discount, it has done the world a service by keeping prices low in the global oil market.

"It's not like there is a political strategy to buy oil," Jaishankar said. "There is a market strategy

to buy oil."

Jaishankar proposed that Zelensky consider other avenues of reaching a peace agreement with Russia besides his peace summit, which did not include Russian delegates in its first gathering in Switzerland in June.

"It is the view, not just of India but certainly of India as well, that there could be multiple ways

of approaching this issue" of peace talks, Jaishankar said. Zelensky, he added, "knows that we mean well by Ukraine. He knows that we are very, very keen that this conflict should come to an end."

Karishma Mehrotra, Anant Gupta and Anastacia Galouchka contributed to this report.