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Medvedev Orders Airline Overhaul After Lokomotiv Tragedy

By Alexandra Odynova

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President Dmitry Medvedev visiting on Thursday the site of a plane crash that killed 43 people, including most of the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl hockey team. **Maxim Shipenkov**

Click here to read the latest on the Lokomotiv Yaroslavl airplane crash.

President Dmitry Medvedev declared on Thursday an urgent overhaul of domestic airlines following the Yak-42 plane crash that killed 43 people, robbing the country of the star ice hockey team Lokomotiv Yaroslavl.

This is the first time that the Kremlin has recognized deep-running problems such as poor aircraft maintenance, a lack of pilots, poor flight training, aging production facilities and negligent state supervision.

Meanwhile, the Kontinental Hockey League was hastily throwing together a plan to keep the decorated club afloat, with many Russian teams pledging to lend their players

to Lokomotiv.

The three-engine passenger jet crashed during takeoff from the Yaroslavl airport on Wednesday afternoon, striking a navigation beacon, tumbling to the ground and shattering on impact.

The plane was chartered to fly Lokomotiv, three-time Russian champions since 1996, to Minsk for their opening game for the 2011-12 season of the Kontinental Hockey League against Dinamo Minsk.

Only two people — team winger Alexander Galimov and flight attendant Alexander Sizov — survived of the 45 people on board, including 37 passengers, all Lokomotiv players and staff, and eight crew members. Both were moved to Moscow on Thursday and hospitalized with severe burns.

Galimov, who is in critical condition at the Vishnevsky Institute, has regained consciousness and was able to speak to his father, doctor Andrei Alexeyev told The Associated Press. Treatment "will be a complex process. Round-the-clock diagnostics will be needed, and we must prevent any infections," Alexeyev said.

All bodies were recovered from the crash site Thursday, the Emergency Situations Ministry said. Thirty-five of them were identified as of late Thursday, Transportation Minister Igor Levitin said.

Two flight recorders were also fished out of the small Tunoshonka River next to the airport, where part of the wreckage ended up, and turned over to crash investigators, Interfax reported.

Pilot error and a mechanical malfunction remained the top explanations for what happened, the Investigative Committee said. It did not elaborate, despite Medvedev's promises on Thursday that the investigation would be "open to the public."

Officials were also investigating reports that substandard fuel had been pumped into the plane. The fuel supply used for the crashed Yak-42 was seized, and samples were sent for analysis, Deputy Transportation Minister Valery Okulov told RIA-Novosti.

Speculation circulated Thursday that the jet had lacked enough space for takeoff because part of the runway was occupied by planes arriving for a third annual international political forum in Yaroslavl, which took place Wednesday and Thursday. Okulov said the version was disproved, with the runway being three times the distance a Yak-42 needed for takeoff.

The plane failed to speed up enough for a proper takeoff, but the pilots still attempted the maneuver instead of emergency braking for some reason, an investigation source told Interfax.

The plane had a skilled crew, with captain Andrei Solontsev having 6,900 hours of flight experience, including 1,500 on Yak-42s, and first officer Sergei Zhuravlyov 15,000 hours, although only 420 on the Yak-42, Okulov said.

The jet was built in 1993 and one of its three engines was replaced last month, Okulov said.

The plane was due for "heavy repairs" later this year, Transportation Minister Levitin said, according to a transcript on the Kremlin's web site.

No nationwide mourning was declared, but the Yaroslavl region will observe three days of mourning starting Friday. The victims will be laid to rest on Saturday after a farewell ceremony at the team's home stadium, Arena-2000.

National television showed thousands of people bringing flowers, candles and Lokomotiv team scarves to the stadium on Thursday.

A Facebook group titled "R.I.P. Lokomotiv Yaroslavl" gathered more than 74,000 users from around the globe by Thursday afternoon.

The accident killed several foreign sport stars, including the team's Canadian coach, Brad McCrimmon, 52, a former blue liner for the Detroit Red Wings, as well as Kazakh-born German Robert Dietrich, Slovak legend Pavol Demitra, Swedish goalkeeper Liv Stefan, Latvian Karlis Skrastins, and three Czechs: Karel Rachunek, Josef Vasicek and Jan Marek.

Channel One television showed hockey fans mourning in Latvia's capital, Riga. Swedish fans lit candles in Jönköping, and players and officials from the North American National Hockey League, where many of Lokomotiv's victims had played at some point in their careers, offered condolences.

The Kontinental Hockey League, centered around Russian teams but also including clubs from Kazakhstan, Belarus, Latvia, Slovakia and Ukraine, canceled all matches for the rest of the week.

Eurasian league chief Alexander Medvedev said each team in the league should volunteer up to three players toward building a new Lokomotiv squad. He said some 35 players have already stepped forward, but gave no names.

Another option would be to promote Lokomotiv's youth squad, Loko, coached by Pyotr Vorobyov, to a KHL club, Gazeta.ru said.

Loko player Maxim Zyuzyakin, 20, was booked for the Minsk game with Lokomotiv, but coach McCrimmon decided at the last minute he should stay home and train more with Loko, Gazeta.ru reported.

Medvedev, who arrived in Yaroslavl for the forum, visited the crash site, laying flowers there. He also held a separate government meeting on the incident and spoke about the crash at the forum.

The number of domestic airlines will be "radically reduced," Medvedev announced at the government meeting, the Kremlin's web site said. He echoed earlier calls by Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, who proposed eliminating many of the country's 130 airlines after a string of deadly crashes this summer.

"There are so many wonders there, the things people tell," Medvedev said about the aviation industry. He promised to "purge those who don't want to work."

The airlines that survive the culling — most likely, the 10 biggest players that transport 85 percent of all passengers — will be ordered to purchase aircraft from abroad if Russian plane makers fail to produce enough quality planes, Medvedev said.

Moreover, "maximum attention should be paid to pilot training," Medvedev said.

Incidentally, a new pilot training program, the Multi-Crew Pilot License, which decreases the number of hours spent training in the air, was introduced at the country's flight schools this fall.

After the Yaroslavl crash, Russia took the lead as the country with the world's most deadliest airspace, with 119 fatalities since January. Most accidents have involved old Soviet aircraft, which prompted Medvedev to ground Tu-134 and An-24 planes on regular flights this summer.

But airlines and industry insiders have repeatedly warned that many Soviet aircraft still have no replacement — domestic or foreign-made — that is sturdy enough to operate in Russia, especially in remote regions of Siberia and the Far East. Moreover, decrepit air fleets are only part of the problem, with pilots, production lines and state officials also contributing to the industry's troubled state.

The Yak-42 will not be grounded but the 57 in operation nationwide will undergo safety checks within days, Transportation Minister Levitin told Medvedev at the government meeting.

The airline operating the crashed plane, Yak Service, a self-attested VIP carrier, refused to comment on the crash Thursday.

The company's fleet also includes four Yak-40 jets, and one of its regular clients since 2008 has been Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov — the official who has championed a crackdown on small carriers.

Ivanov, whose portfolio as minister includes air safety, did not comment on the crash or say whether he plans to change airlines. But an unidentified official at the Transportation Ministry told RIA-Novosti that Yak Service would be shut down.

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