

KHL President Seeks to Improve NHL Relations After Crash

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The sense of shared grief following a plane crash that took the lives of 28 Lokomotiv Yaroslavl players could serve as the basis of improved relations with the NHL, Kontinental Hockey League President Alexander Medvedev said Tuesday.

"I would like very much for this to be no mere surge of emotion, but that we move in step with each other," said Medvedev, who added that he plans to soon meet with NHL counterpart Gary Bettman to discuss how the two leagues can cooperate better.

"This was a tragedy for the entire family of hockey. Now we will consider our differences with the NHL in quite a different light," Medvedev, who is also deputy head of Gazprom, said in a statement on the KHL web site. "Through cooperation, we will ensure that hockey is made better than is possible when we are divided or in isolation."

The crash Wednesday of a chartered Yak-42 jet in Yaroslavl's airport took the lives of 28 Lokomotiv players, two coaches, and seven other team staff. The total death toll stood at 44.

Relations between the NHL and KHL have been tested over recent years by competition to sign the best players. Growing prosperity among KHL clubs means that they are now more often able to hold on to homegrown players and lure others back from the NHL.

Medvedev also said the KHL is preparing proposals to create a centralized system of flights using modern Russian and foreign aircraft.

"The league is willing to pay two months in advance for teams' flights and then settle up later," Medvedev said.

The Yak-42 that crashed in Yaroslavl belonged to small Moscow-based charter company Yak Service. Many KHL teams tend to rely on such companies to carry them on their long flights.

Until Lokomotiv's forced pullout, the Kontinental Hockey League had 24 professional teams across Russia, Belarus, Latvia, Kazakhstan and Slovakia. Lokomotiv was a leading force in Russian hockey and came third in the KHL last year. It was also a three-time Russian league champion in 1997, 2002 and 2003.

The KHL also said the withdrawal of Lokomotiv from the league means that the total number of games to be played in the first half of the season has been revised to 621, from 672 previously. Each team will play 54 matches over the season.

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