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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Won't Halt Egypt-Bound Flights, Calls British Response 'Political'

By Eva Hartog

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The remains of a Russian airliner are inspected by military investigators at the crash site at the al-Hasanah area in El Arish city, north Egypt, Nov. 1, 2015.

A day after Britain suspended air traffic to Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh resort for security reasons, Russian officials insisted that the cause of the largest disaster in Russian aviation history was still unknown as Russian airlines continued to operate flights to the region.

The St. Petersburg-bound Airbus A321 crashed on Saturday in Egypt's restive Sinai peninsula shortly after taking off from the Sharm el-Sheikh resort — a popular destination for Russian tourists — killing all on board.

A funeral was held Thursday in Veliky Novgorod in northwest Russia for Nina Lushenko, a former employee at a local school, in the first such ceremony for the disaster's 224 victims, the Novgorod.ru news portal reported, citing the city administration's press service.

The Islamic State terrorist organization on Wednesday reiterated an earlier statement in which it claimed responsibility for the Kogalymavia plane crash, Reuters reported.

But Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev told a government meeting it was too early to draw any conclusions, state-run RIA Novosti agency said Thursday.

Egypt's Civil Aviation Minister Hossam Kamal also said Thursday in an online statement that investigators had not found conclusive evidence that an onboard explosion had caused the tragedy.

The statements come a day after Britain banned all non-essential flights to Sharm el-Sheikh, saying the crash had likely been caused by an explosive device on board the aircraft. The British government has also announced a mass evacuation plan for around 20,000 citizens in the region.

'Political'

Head of the Federation Council's International Affairs Committee, Konstantin Kosachev, on Thursday slammed the British flight ban, calling it politically motivated, state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported.

“There is geopolitically-motivated opposition to Russia's actions in Syria. As sacrilegious as it sounds, there are enough of those in the world, who would want to blame this disaster on a jihadi response to Russia without proper evidence,” he was cited as saying.

Russia on Sept. 30 launched a military air offensive in Syria to fight the Islamic State but Western leaders have accused Russia of targeting moderate opposition groups in a bid to shore up the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Kosachev said Russia would only enact a flight ban “if there are sufficient grounds to do so,” adding Russian investigators had not found enough evidence for the “far-reaching conclusions” drawn by Britain.

Russia's Foreign Ministry has not given any negative travel recommendations to Egypt and travel was continuing as usual, head of the federal tourism agency Oleg Safonov told RIA Novosti on Thursday.

Kogalymavia, the airline operating the flight that crashed, said it would stop operating Airbus A321 aircraft while additional checks were being conducted, a separate RIA Novosti report said Thursday.

Russian media on Thursday reported that passengers had been evacuated from another Kogalymavia aircraft at St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport right before takeoff for technical reasons.

The plane had been bound for Sharm el-Sheikh, the pro-Kremlin Lifenews tabloid reported.

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