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Russia 'Guilty' Over Downed Azerbaijan Plane, Aliyev Says

By AFP

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The crash site of Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8432 near the city of Aktau. **Isa Tazhenbayev / TASS**

Azerbaijan's president said on Monday that Russia was "guilty" over the downing of an airline last month that Baku says was shot by Russian air defenses.

An Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 jet crash-landed in Kazakhstan on Dec. 25, killing 38 of the 67 people on board, after being diverted from a scheduled landing in the southern Russian city of Grozny.

Moscow has admitted its air defenses were operational in the area at the time, which it said was under attack from Ukrainian drones.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has apologized that the "incident" occurred in his country's air space but has not responded to claims the plane was hit by Russian weapons.

"The guilt for the death of Azerbaijani citizens lies with representatives of the Russian

Federation," Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said on Monday, according to a statement published by his office.

Aliyev was meeting surviving crew and family members of crew who died in the incident.

The Azerbaijani leader, who is close to Putin, has issued rare fierce criticism of Moscow over the crash, demanding an apology, admission of guilt and the punishment of those found responsible for the "criminal" shooting of the plane.

On Monday he said Russia's "concealment" of the causes and "delusional versions" being put forward "cause us justifiable anger."

Initial statements by Russia's air transport agency that the plane had been forced to divert after a bird strike have triggered fury in Baku.

Aliyev said air defense measures for Grozny — the capital of Russia's southern republic of Chechnya, where the plane was set to land — were only announced after the plane had been "shot from the ground."

"If there was a danger to Russian airspace, then the captain of the plane should have been informed straight away," Aliyev said.

He also questioned why the plane was sent hundreds of kilometers across the Caspian Sea to the Kazakh city of Aktau for an emergency landing.

"Why it was directed to Aktau, we have no information," Aliyev said.

Azerbaijan says preliminary results of its investigation show the plane was hit accidentally by a Russian air defense missile.

Russia has opened its own criminal probe but has not said whether it agrees with Baku's assessment.

The plane's black boxes have been sent to Brazil for analysis.

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