

Obama says will not relent in fight against Islamic State, urges Russia help

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Kuala Lumpur: President Barack Obama vowed Sunday that the United States and its international partners "will not relent" in the fight against the Islamic State, insisting the world would not accept the extremists' attacks on civilians in Paris and elsewhere as the "new normal."

Wrapping up a nine-day trip to Turkey and Asia, Obama also pressed Russian President Vladimir Putin to align himself with the US-led coalition, noting that the Islamic State has been accused of bringing down a Russian passenger jet last month, killing 224 people.

"He needs to go after the people who killed Russia's citizens," Obama said of Putin.

The president spoke in Malaysia shortly before departing for Washington. The trip also took him to the Philippines and Turkey, where he met with Putin on the sidelines of an international summit.

While Russia has stepped up its air campaign in Syria, Obama said Moscow has focused its attention on moderate rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar Assad, a Russian ally. He called on Russia to make a "strategic adjustment" and drop its support for Assad, insisting the violence in Syria cannot be stopped as long as Assad is in office.

"It will not work to keep him in power," Obama said. "We can't stop the fighting."

Nearly five years of fighting between the Assad government and rebels has created a vacuum that allowed the Islamic State to thrive in both Syria and Iraq. The militant group is now setting its sights on targets outside its stronghold, including the attacks in Paris that killed 130 people and wounded hundreds more.

French President Francois Hollande is due to meet with Obama at the White House on Tuesday to discuss ways to bolster the international coalition fighting the Islamic State. Hollande then heads to Russia for talks with Putin.

The Paris attacks have heightened fears of terrorism in the West and also sparked a debate in the US about accepting refugees from Syria. It's unclear whether any of the terrorists in the Paris attacks exploited the refugee system to enter Europe, though Obama has insisted that's not a legitimate security threat in the United States.

Still, the House passed legislation last week essentially blocking Syrian and Iraqi refugees from the US Democrats in large numbers abandoned the president, with 47 voting for the legislation. Having secured a veto-proof majority in the House, supporters are now hoping for a repeat in the Senate, while Obama works to shift the conversation to milder visa waiver changes that wouldn't affect Syrian refugees.

Obama has focused his ire on Republicans throughout the trip, harshly criticizing GOP lawmakers and presidential candidates for acting contrary to American values. He took a softer tone Sunday, saying he understands Americans' concerns but urging them not to give into fear.

He said the Islamic State "can't beat us on the battlefield so they try to terrorize us into being afraid."

- AP