

Putin postpones visit to France amid diplomatic tensions on Syria, Hollande says would meet 'any

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Moscow: Russian President Vladimir Putin has indefinitely postponed a trip to France amid tension between two countries over French President Francois Hollande's comment that Moscow could face war crimes charges over its bombardment of Syria's city of Aleppo.

Putin was scheduled to visit Paris on October 19.

French President Francois Hollande said Tuesday that Putin put off his visit set for next week after Hollande let him know he wouldn't take part in the opening of a new Russian Orthodox church and was only interested in talks about Syria.

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Over the weekend, Russia blocked a U.N. Security Council resolution proposed by France and Spain on ending the hostilities in the war-torn country, blaming Paris for the refusal to discuss a compromise version. And on Monday, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault called on the International Criminal Court to investigate Russia for possible war crimes in Syria.

"France has a major disagreement with Russia over Syria," Hollande said. "And the Russian veto to the French resolution at the U.N. council has prevented the cessation of the bombings, as well as the proclamation of a cease-fire."

At the same time, he added that he believes that a dialogue with Russia is essential for ending the massacre.

"The main victims are the civilians who live and die under the bombs," Hollande said. "That's the reason why I consider that a dialogue with Russia is necessary. But it should be firm and open. Otherwise ... it's a mockery."

Russian warplanes have carried out airstrikes in rebel-held Aleppo in coordination with President Bashar al-Assad's forces, killing scores of civilians.

On Tuesday, fresh airstrikes killed at least 16 people, according to activists and residents. Around 20 airstrikes, including cluster munitions and bunker-busting bombs, hit seven neighborhoods in the besieged eastern parts of the city.

Putin's trip to Paris, which was planned for next Tuesday, was due to take in the opening of a new Orthodox church next to the Eiffel Tower along with a Russian cultural center and an exhibition, but the French side had revised the program, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"Regrettably, those events dropped out of the program," Peskov said, saying it's up to the French side to explain the reason.

Peskov said that Putin could visit France at a later date which would be "comfortable" for Hollande.

He denied that the cancellation of Putin's visit to France reflected a growing international isolation of Moscow over its actions in Syria, where Russian warplanes have supported the Syrian army offensive on Aleppo.

"Russia and its president aren't facing anything of the kind," Peskov said.

Ayrault's statement Monday followed U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's call for a war crimes investigation into Russian and Syrian airstrikes in Syria, an appeal Russia has angrily rejected.

Hollande said he was ready to meet the Russian leader at any moment if it helps bring peace to Syria.

Asked about a possible meeting of Russian, French, German and Ukrainian leaders in Berlin on Oct. 19 to discuss the Ukrainian crisis, Peskov said that "preliminary preparation for such a meeting has been underway," but stopped short of announcing it.

Hollande said that the progress on implementing a 2015 peace deal for eastern Ukraine has been too slow. The Minsk agreement, which was brokered by France and Germany, helped end large-scale battles, but smaller clashes have continued to claim lives and a political settlement has stalled.

"We need to progress on the political and security conditions that will enable elections in eastern Ukraine as soon as possible, as the Minsk deals stipulate it," Hollande said, adding that he and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were both willing to have the four-way meeting.

- (With AP inputs)