

Kremlin calls accusations it killed Wagner boss Prigozhin an 'absolute lie'

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- Summary
- Kremlin makes first comments on deadly plane crash
- Calls claims Putin ordered Wagner boss killed 'absolute lie'
- Declines to confirm Prigozhin's death
- Says test/investigation results are needed first

MOSCOW, Aug 25 (Reuters) - The Kremlin said that Western suggestions Russian mercenary boss Yevgeny Prigozhin had been killed on its orders were an "absolute lie" while declining to definitively confirm his death, citing the need to wait for test results.

Russia's aviation authority has said that Prigozhin, head of the Wagner mercenary group, was on board a private jet which crashed on Wednesday evening northwest of Moscow with no survivors.

President Vladimir Putin sent his condolences to the families of those killed in the crash on Thursday and spoke of Prigozhin in the past tense, breaking his silence after the incident which occurred exactly two months to the day after Prigozhin led a failed mutiny against army chiefs.

Putin cited "preliminary information" as indicating that Prigozhin and his top associates in the Wagner mercenary group had all been killed and, while praising Prigozhin, said he had also made some "serious mistakes."

Western politicians and commentators have suggested, without presenting evidence, that Putin ordered Prigozhin to be killed in order to punish him for launching the June 23-34 mutiny against the army's leadership which also represented the biggest challenge to Putin's own rule since he came to power in 1999.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the accusation and many others like it were false.

"There is now a great deal of speculation surrounding this plane crash and the tragic deaths of the plane's passengers, including Yevgeny Prigozhin. Of course, in the West, all this speculation is presented from a well-known angle," Peskov told reporters.

"All of this is an absolute lie, and here, when covering this issue, it is necessary to base yourself on facts. There are not many facts yet. They need to be established in the course of investigative actions," he said.

Earlier on Friday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov had scolded U.S. President Joe Biden for expressing his lack of surprise that Prigozhin had been killed in a plane crash, accusing Biden of disregarding diplomatic norms.

'WAIT FOR TEST RESULTS'

Russian investigators have opened a probe into what happened, but have not yet said what they suspect caused the plane to suddenly fall from the sky northwest of Moscow.

Nor have they officially confirmed the identities of the 10 bodies recovered from the wreckage.

Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with the crew of the Alyosha T-80 tank, which destroyed a Ukrainian armoured convoy on the Zaporizhzhia direction in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict, at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia August 24, 2023. Sputnik/Mikhail Klimentyev/Kremlin via REUTERS/File Photo Acquire Licensing Rights

Asked if the Kremlin had received official confirmation of Prigozhin's death, Peskov said: "If you listened carefully to the Russian president's statement, he said that all the necessary tests, including genetic tests, will now be carried out. The official results - as soon as they are ready to be published, will be published."

Peskov, who said Putin had not met Prigozhin recently, also said it was unclear how long the tests and investigative work would take.

It was therefore impossible to start talking about whether [Putin](#) would attend [Prigozhin](#)'s funeral, [Peskov](#) said in answer to a question on the subject.

"There are no dates for the funeral yet, it is impossible to talk about it at all. The only thing I can say is that the president has a rather busy schedule at the moment."

[Nigel Gould-Davies](#), a former [British](#) ambassador to [Belarus](#) who is now a senior fellow at the [International Institute for Strategic Studies \(IISS\)](#), said the funeral would be significant.

"If [Putin](#) wishes to emphasise that [Prigozhin](#) died as a traitor, he will ignore it," said [Gould-Davies](#).

"(While) [Prigozhin](#)'s supporters may use it as an opportunity to eulogise him and his critique of the [Kremlin](#)'s conduct of the war -- and could strengthen the hostility of a core of [Wagner](#) loyalists towards the Kremlin," he said.

[British](#) military intelligence [said](#) on Friday there was not yet definitive proof that [Prigozhin](#) had been onboard but that it was "highly likely" he was dead.

The [Pentagon](#) has said its own initial assessment is that [Prigozhin](#) was killed.

[Russia](#)'s [Baza](#) news outlet, which has good sources among law enforcement agencies, has reported that investigators are focusing on a theory that one or two bombs may have been planted on board the plane.

Asked about the future of the [Wagner Group](#), which has series of lucrative contracts across [Africa](#) and a contingent in [Belarus](#) training the army there but now appears leaderless, [Kremlin](#) spokesman [Peskov](#) was concise.

"I can't tell you anything now, I don't know," he said.

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As [Russia](#) Chief Political Correspondent, and former [Moscow](#) bureau chief, [Andrew](#) helps lead coverage of the world's largest country, whose political, economic and social transformation under President [Vladimir Putin](#) he has reported on for much of the last two decades, along with its growing confrontation with the [West](#) and wars in [Georgia](#) and [Ukraine](#). Andrew was part of a [Wall Street Journal](#) reporting team short-listed for a [Pulitzer Prize](#) for international reporting. He has also reported from Moscow for two [British](#) newspapers, [The Telegraph](#) and [The Independent](#).