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## **BRITAIN, FRANCE SEEK EU CONDEMNATION OF RUSSIA OVER SYRIA**

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18.10.2016

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Reuters, 17 October 2016

Britain and France sought to persuade the European Union on Monday to condemn Russia's devastating air campaign in Syria and pave the way for imposing more sanctions on President Bashar al-Assad's government.

After a weekend of U.S.-led diplomacy that failed to find a breakthrough, EU foreign ministers met in Luxembourg to call for an end to the bombing of rebel-held east Aleppo, where 275,000 people are trapped, and to rush humanitarian aid into the city.

"The pressure (on Russia) must be strong," France's Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said. "The more the European Union shows unity and determination, the more we can move forward in what is a moral obligation: to stop the massacre of the population of Aleppo," he told reporters.

But the bloc is split over strategy towards Russia, its biggest energy supplier, with divisions about how harsh any criticism of Moscow should be and whether there was ground for also putting Russians under sanctions.

Britain and France want to put another 20 Syrians under travel bans and asset freezes, suspecting them of directing attacks on civilians in Aleppo, in addition to the EU's existing sanctions list and its oil and arms embargo.

Paris and London have also raised the prospect of sanctions on 12 Russians involved in the Syrian conflict, adding them to the EU's list of some 200 people that also includes three Iranians, diplomats told Reuters.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who held talks with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on

Sunday in London, said Russia's Aleppo bombing "shames humanity" and called Russia the Syrian government's "puppeteers."

On Sunday in London, Britain and the United States said they were considering imposing additional sanctions on Assad and his supporters, without naming Russia.

Chairing the Luxembourg meeting, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said there was a chance that ministers would agree to put more Syrians on the EU's list of people blocked from traveling to Europe or accessing money there.

European Union leaders are expected to discuss Russia and possible new sanctions at a summit in Brussels on Thursday but Russia's closest EU allies such as Greece, Cyprus and Hungary are against. Austria also voiced its opposition on Monday.

"The idea to have additional sanctions against Russia would be wrong," Austria's Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz told reporters. "We do not need a further escalation," he said.

Germany also appeared cautious, with Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier rejecting adding punitive measures against Russia, although a German newspaper has cited sources saying that Chancellor Angela Merkel was in favor.

The West imposed broad economic sanctions on Moscow over its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its support for rebels in Ukraine.

## EU AID BLOCKED

In another sign of divisions over Russia, diplomats were still grappling with the wording of the diplomatic statement to be delivered on Monday by foreign ministers, split over whether to name Russia at all.

According to one draft seen by Reuters, EU ministers will condemn the "catastrophic escalation" of the Syrian government offensive to capture eastern Aleppo, where 8,000 rebels are holding out against Syrian, Russian and Iranian-backed forces.

They will say that air strikes on hospitals and civilians "may amount to war crimes", calling on "Syria and its allies" to go to the International Criminal Court

Diplomats say the European Union will also call for a ceasefire with an observation mission, a renewed push for peace talks to include Mogherini and immediate access for an EU aid package announced on Oct. 2.

The bloc, the biggest aid donor in the Syrian conflict, is in almost daily contact with charities to move in, but diplomats say the trucks cannot get through checkpoints to eastern Aleppo.

"There is no point-blank refusal, but drivers are asked for things they don't have, like special driving licenses," said one EU official. "We need a facilitation letter from the Syrian authorities."

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Kaynak/Source: