

Cameron Ready for Putin Judo Diplomacy

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LONDON — President Vladimir Putin, a black belt in judo, may spar with Britain's prime minister in the diplomatic arena over Syria at a judo match during the London Olympic Games, British sources said Tuesday.

Sources close to British Prime Minister David Cameron said he would accompany Putin to a match if the Kremlin leader attends the games and would likely press him over Syria.

Last month, Putin's spokesman said he might make his first visit to Britain in nine years to watch the judo contest at the games, which start Friday. The British sources said it was not yet clear whether Putin would be coming to London.

Russia has faced growing Western criticism of its position on Syria, with countries like Britain demanding that Moscow drop its support for President Bashar Assad.

An impromptu meeting would give Cameron an opportunity to put pressure on Putin over Russia's opposition to UN sanctions against Assad's government, one British source said.

Putin, a onetime judo champion in his native city of St. Petersburg, has sought to advance his macho image at home by releasing photographs of himself practicing judo, saving wild tigers and riding a horse bare-chested in Siberia.

His diplomatic stance on Syria has been tough, as well.

Russia, which has a right of veto on the UN Security Council, provides arms to Syria and has repeatedly blocked Western resolutions calling for foreign intervention since the uprising against Assad's rule began 16 months ago.

Putin says that Syria's crisis must be resolved through negotiations, not force, and that ousting Assad would not necessarily lead to peace.

Britain, like other Western nations, has strongly criticized Russia's position. British Foreign Secretary William Hague last week described Russia's and China's vetoes of a UN Security Council resolution on Syria as "inexcusable and indefensible."

Relations between Britain and Russia have been frosty since the 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer who died from poisoning by radioactive polonium-210. Several other Putin foes have also received asylum in Britain.

Cameron visited Moscow last year, ending a four-year period during which Putin had no high-level contact with British officials.

Russia's Foreign Ministry warned Syria on Tuesday not to use chemical weapons, saying Moscow "proceeds from the assumption" that the government will adhere to its international obligations.

In a statement, it said Syria had ratified an international protocol in 1968 that bars the use of poison gases as a method of warfare.

In a separate statement, the ministry reiterated a warning to its citizens against traveling to Syria, citing what it called the "extremely tense situation" and persistent fighting.

The statement pointed out that Aeroflot was suspending flights between Moscow and Damascus as of Aug. 6.

The airline, which announced the suspension Monday, cited low demand.

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