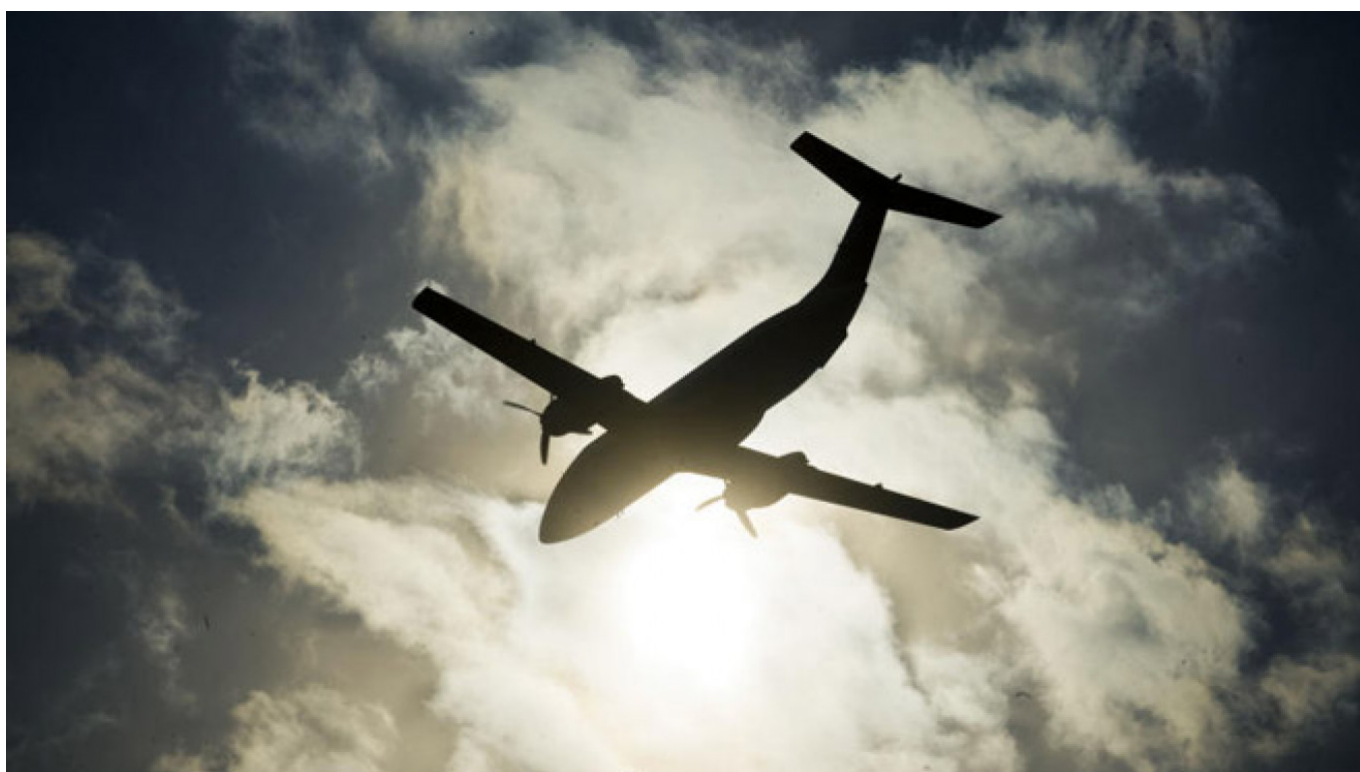


Negotiations Under Way to Release Russians Detained in Nigeria

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The French Embassy said Monday that the aircraft had received diplomatic clearance to fly to Kano and that Nigerian authorities would allow it to continue to N'Djamena soon.

KANO, Nigeria — The Russian Embassy in Nigeria said it is negotiating the release of 18 Russian crew members detained after their transport plane was seized in northern Nigeria over the weekend.

The two military helicopters on board the Russian-made aircraft belong to France and will soon be allowed to leave the country, France's ambassador to Nigeria said Monday.

Nigerian authorities became suspicious when an Antonov transport plane flying from Central African Republic to Chad diverted off course to Kano. It was impounded with the helicopters on Saturday, along with two French officers and the 18 Russian crew members.

The Russian Embassy said it is negotiating the release of the detained Russian crew members. Nigerian authorities earlier had identified the crew as Ukrainian.

A statement from French Ambassador Jacques Champagne de Labriolle said the plane rerouted because of heavy air traffic at N'Djamena, the Chad capital.

He said the plane was carrying two Gazelle helicopters no longer needed for the French intervention in Central African Republic, and being redeployed to Chad to support a regional fight against terrorism. The ambassador denied reports the aircraft also was carrying weapons and ammunition.

The French statement dated Sunday said two French military officers accompanied the helicopters.

The French Embassy said Monday that the aircraft had received diplomatic clearance to fly to Kano and that Nigerian authorities would allow it to continue to N'Djamena soon.

But PR Nigeria, which issues statements for Nigerian security agencies, quoted unidentified officers as saying the plane would not be released until investigations are concluded.

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