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Poland Exhumes Bodies From 2010 Crash

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WARSAW — Polish investigators have exhumed the remains of three of the 96 Poles killed in the 2010 plane crash in Russia that killed President Lech Kaczynski because of flaws in the initial autopsies performed by Russian officials.

The need for the new autopsies has added to suspicions that the Russians were, at best, sloppy in their handling of the crash aftermath, and, at worst, trying to cover something up.

Victims' families and officials say other reports are riddled with mistakes, and prosecutors say more exhumations are possible.

"There were discrepancies. Evidence gathered in Poland differed from information in the Russian documentation," said Colonel Zbigniew Rzepa, spokesman for the chief military prosecutor's office. "We had to carry out the exhumations to clarify all the doubts."

Surviving relatives of the three have been enraged by the faulty autopsy reports, which have added to their private grief.

Many also fault the Polish government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk for not being firmer with Russia in demanding greater transparency.

This comes amid a sense of indignation that key evidence in the crash — black boxes, the plane wreckage and the late Polish president's satellite phone — remain in Russian hands.

At one extreme, the flawed autopsies and the sense that Russians are not being fully transparent have encouraged Polish conspiracy theories claiming Russian leaders played a role in the downing of Kaczynski's plane, which crashed in fog after clipping a tree at an airport near Smolensk on April 10, 2010.

An official Polish report blamed the fog, pilot error and poor guidance from Russian air traffic controllers.

But Antoni Macierewicz, a conservative lawmaker who heads a parliamentary commission trying to clarify the reasons for the crash, said Friday that he doesn't believe the official Polish explanation and that other theories need to be explored.

Suspicions center on the fact that the plane, a Tupolev-154, was Russian-built. Some Poles don't believe that the plane could have crashed just by clipping a tree, and they find it strange that there were no survivors even though it was close to the ground when it crashed.

"A lack of openness creates conspiracy theories," said Michael Baden, an American forensic pathologist who has advised some of the victims' families. "You can't investigate a major catastrophe in secret."

Andrei Kovalyov, head of the Russian Center for Forensic Expertise, which conducted the autopsies, said genetic research and inspections of the bodies were performed to international standards.

"Any discrepancies, if they exist, are likely rooted not in badly performed autopsies but the fact that the bodies were fragmented," Kovalyov said. "When remains of the numerous victims get mixed up inside the cabin, there can be problems regarding the attribution of body parts."

Many Poles accept the Russian explanation and see no need for the exhumations. Tusk said it's hard to expect perfect reports given "what state the bodies were in after the crash."

The first victim to be exhumed, the late conservative lawmaker Zbigniew Wassermann, had an autopsy report that was largely incorrect and described organs that had been surgically removed years before, Macierewicz said.

"The document from the Russian autopsy was taken out of the blue," said Wassermann's daughter, Malgorzata Wassermann. "It disagreed with the facts. It described things that did not exist and did not describe things that were there."

His new autopsy, carried out in August, corrected the record but did not change the larger conclusions about the cause of his death, said Colonel Ireneusz Szelag, a spokesman for prosecutors.

Another lawmaker, Przemyslaw Gosiewski, was exhumed Monday. The Russian autopsy report described him as 1.8 meters tall, when in fact he was 20 centimeters shorter, according to the law firm representing the family.

The report also failed to mention bone defects resulting from childhood polio.

"Glaring irregularities in the documentation mean that there can't be certainty if an autopsy was even carried out," said Rafal Rogalski, the Gosiewski family lawyer.

In the case of the third exhumation, family members of Janusz Kurtyka, head of a state historical institute, doubt that an autopsy was performed because they saw no marks on his body indicating a post-mortem, Szelag said.

Andrzej Melak, the brother of victim Stefan Melak, told the parliamentary commission Friday that the Russian documentation was 25 centimeters off in describing his brother's height.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "Our government doesn't care about Polish citizens."

Families are also angry because the new autopsies have been performed by state experts and they are not allowed to do their own.

Kaczynski was a deeply patriotic leader who was skeptical of Russia. Most of the people traveling with him were political allies who shared his views, so it's no surprise that their families would voice distrust of Russia after the crash.

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