

Britain to Hold Inquest Into Litvinenko Poisoning

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LONDON — Britain has appointed a senior judge to hold an inquest into the death of Alexander Litvinenko, the former Russian agent turned Kremlin critic whose death from polonium poisoning in London in 2006 soured relations between London and Moscow.

Britain's Judicial Office said Thursday that it had selected Robert Owen, an experienced judge, for the task and that he would hold a hearing in September to decide how the inquest would be conducted and whether it would be heard before a jury.

Litvinenko's wife Marina, who lives in Britain, said she felt relieved the decision had finally been made.

"I am just happy," she said.

The decision to appoint a judge comes a week after President Vladimir Putin made his first visit to London in nine years to watch judo with British Prime Minister David Cameron and risks souring slowly improving relations.

Ties between Britain and Russia plunged to a post-Cold War low after Litvinenko's killing, complete with tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions.

Russia has since refused to extradite Andrei Lugovoi, the former KGB bodyguard Britain wants to prosecute for Litvinenko's murder by poisoning with radioactive polonium.

The Judicial Office, which is independent of government ministers, said the timing of the inquest announcement was not connected to Putin's visit or any other political consideration.

Britain rarely appoints judges as coroners in charge of inquests, reserving their appointment for the most complex and high-profile cases, such as the 1997 death of Princess Diana or the killings of London commuters in suicide attacks in 2005.

Marina Litvinenko has long argued that the Russian state was complicit in her husband's murder and has demanded that Britain hold a wide-ranging inquest into his death.

Litvinenko, who had been granted British citizenship, was poisoned with polonium-210, a rare and highly toxic radioactive isotope, which was slipped to him in a cup of tea at a plush London hotel.

Lugovoi, who was later elected to the State Duma, has denied any involvement.

Britain's Foreign Office said that the inquest was a judicial matter but that the government remained committed to seeking justice over Litvinenko's death.

"This was a crime which took place in the U.K. and involved a British citizen. Our aim remains to see this matter tried in a U.K. court," a government spokesman said.

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