

U.K. Judge Says Litvinenko Inquest to Open in 2013

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LONDON — A long-awaited inquest into the poisoning death of former Russian agent Alexander Litvinenko should consider whether Russian authorities were involved, the senior British judge who will oversee it said Thursday. But the U.K. government will not let lawyers for the victim's family and the suspects see a report on alleged links between Litvinenko and British intelligence.

Litvinenko's family believes the Kremlin was behind his death from radioactive poisoning in London in November 2006. The former security service officer, a critic of the Kremlin, died after drinking tea laced with the rare radioactive isotope polonium-210 at a London hotel.

On his deathbed, he accused President Vladimir Putin of being behind his poisoning.

Ben Emmerson, a lawyer for Litvinenko's widow, Marina, told a court hearing that it was vital that the inquest investigate "the criminal role of the Russian state."

Emmerson said that if official Russian involvement was proved, it would constitute "an act of

state-sponsored nuclear terrorism on the streets of London."

Judge Robert Owen, who will lead the inquest, said its scope would be decided at a later hearing, but indicated he was inclined to agree it should look at Russia's alleged role.

Owen said it was "to be regretted" that no inquest has been held in the nearly six years since the former security service officer died. Owen said he would open his inquest as early in 2013 as possible.

The killing cast a pall over U.K.-Russian relations that still persists. British prosecutors have accused two Russians, Alexander Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, of killing Litvinenko, but Russia refuses to hand them over. Lugovoi is now a Russian lawmaker.

Lawyer Hugh Davies, the inquest's counsel, said the judge-led inquiry should be a "full and fearless" examination of all the facts.

But he said some evidence will be withheld at the request of the British government.

Davies said all interested parties, including lawyers for the Litvinenko family, Lugovoi and the British government, would be given a police report into Litvinenko's death before the inquest begins. One section, however, will be censored: the results of police inquiries into whether Litvinenko was in contact with Britain's MI6 intelligence service.

Davies said the judge and the inquiry's lawyers had seen the full report. The redaction, at the British government's request, "should not be taken as indicating one way or another" whether Litvinenko had dealings with British spies.

The judge set another pre-inquest hearing for Nov. 2.

In Britain, an inquest is held to determine the facts whenever someone dies unexpectedly, violently or in disputed circumstances. They do not determine criminal liability.

Outside court, Marina Litvinenko said she was confident she would get justice from the inquest.

"I'm not a politician, I'm a woman who lost her husband and I want to know what happened," she said.

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