

Probe Into Malaysian Airlines Fraught With Difficulties

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OSCE monitors holding their breaths as they stand outside of a train wagon allegedly containing crash victims.

Three days after the downing of a passenger plane over conflict-torn eastern Ukraine claimed 298 lives, questions raised by the investigation far exceed any clarity gleaned into who is to blame for the tragedy.

Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Groisman said Sunday that Kiev could not guarantee the safety of international experts planning to investigate the crash site in Torez, as the territory is controlled by pro-Russian separatists, RIA Novosti reported.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Sunday accused the separatists of having impeded both the investigation and the proper transportation of bodies retrieved from the site. He reiterated his earlier claims that the tactical missile system believed to have downed the jet was transferred to the rebels by Russia.

Meanwhile, leader of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic Vyacheslav Bolotov told journalists on Sunday that the separatists are prepared to show international experts the inoperative condition of a Buk missile system that it was accused of having used to shoot down the Boeing 777, Gazeta.ru reported.

In late June the so-called Donetsk People's Republic boasted via Twitter of having taken possession of a Buk missile system from a captured Ukrainian military base. Immediately following the crash on Thursday, speculation ran rife that the procured system had been used to down the plane.

The rebels have since claimed, however, that the Buk is inoperable. On Sunday, leader of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic Vyacheslav Bolotov told journalists that he is prepared to demonstrate its sorry condition to international investigators, Gazeta.ru reported.

As of Sunday, 223 bodies had been retrieved from the wreckage site, RIA Novosti reported quoting Ukraine's Emergency Situations Service.

The flight's black boxes — which may contain crucial audio of what happened on the plane in the moments before it was obliterated — were "under the personal control" of Alexander Borodai, prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, on Sunday, though in comments to Interfax he promised to hand them over to international investigators.

He added that the rebels will not give the black boxes to the Ukrainian officials for fear of "falsifications of the results of the probe."

International Leaders Consult

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Francois Hollande had a three-way phone call on Sunday. Their conversation culminated in the issuance of a demand that President Vladimir Putin apply pressure on the rebels to provide international inspectors "free and total access" to the crash site, a statement from Hollande's office said.

"If Russia does not immediately take the necessary measures, conclusions will be drawn by the European Union at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting which will be held on Tuesday," Hollande's statement said, apparently referring to a possibility of new sanctions against Russia.

Merkel also spoke by phone with Putin on Sunday, during which the Russian president called on all sides of the Ukrainian conflict to guarantee the safe work of the experts at the site of the tragedy, and create conditions for an objective and independent international investigation, according to a statement released by the Kremlin.

One day earlier, Putin had discussed the situation with Merkel and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, during which all parties agreed that the probe should be an international one, led by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), with access to the site guaranteed to representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other international experts, the Kremlin announced in a statement Saturday.

Chaos at the Crash Site

In the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe, journalists and international monitors at the wreckage site in Torez described a surreal scene: "visibly intoxicated" armed rebels blocking monitors' access to evidence, going through crash victims' personal belongings and at one point even firing a gun into the air when a reporter tried to stray from a designated area.

"At this stage, any talk of a credible investigation is ridiculous. It'll be a small miracle if relatives get the bodies semi-intact," BuzzFeed reporter Max Seddon wrote on Twitter from the crash site.

Short snippets describing the mayhem went viral.

"One of the rebels casually threatens to kneecap reporters every five minutes. Another is wearing a beekeeping suit and reeks of alcohol," Seddon wrote.

Other journalists posted photos of armed rebels holding up children's toys as they sifted through the crash victims' personal belongings.

The Kremlin's Power Over the Rebels

While there has been much debate over how much influence Moscow actually has over the rebels, who voluntarily swear allegiance to the Kremlin, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov has repeatedly stressed that observers "should not exaggerate" Russia's sway over the rebels.

"Moscow cannot tell the separatists what to do," Peskov told the Kommersant business daily earlier this month.

According to Viktor Mironenko, head of the Ukrainian Studies Center at the Russian Academy of Sciences' European Institute, Putin likely could have gotten through to them as recently as a few weeks ago.

But he can't anymore.

"In the situation we are seeing today, Putin himself can no longer defuse the explosive charge that has been set in Ukraine. He can only try to reduce the devastating effects of its detonation on Russia, first and foremost, and on Europe and the rest of the world, with the help of others," Mironenko said.

"But what could be his motivation to take part in these efforts? That is the real question," Mironenko said, adding that German Chancellor Angela Merkel would be the best candidate to influence Putin's next steps.

The Investigation

On Saturday, a group of 131 people made up of aviation experts and doctors from Malaysia arrived in Kiev to begin the investigation into the plane crash and the identification of the victims. Other experts were en route from Europe and the U.S., though Russian experts were not invited to take part despite Putin's offer for full assistance days earlier.

Russia's role in the investigation would appear to have been predetermined, with Western leaders apparently sending a message to Russia to keep its hands off, so to speak, while at the same time calling on Putin to reign in the pro-Kremlin rebels.

This "you've-already-done-more-than-enough" attitude is evident in Kiev's reaction to Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry's offer to send rescuers to the scene to help locate bodies and clean up the wreckage.

"We contacted our partners and colleagues in Ukraine with an offer to lend assistance, using experience we have in such situations. But we have not gotten any real answer, not even a reaction," ITAR-Tass cited the deputy head of the ministry, Vladimir Artamanov, as saying on Friday.

The BBC reported Saturday that two dozen OSCE observers said they were only allowed into a small area on the crash site on Saturday, and only for about an hour. Other Western journalists described chaos and disorder, citing the OSCE monitors as saying that evidence appeared to have been moved and some body bags left open for unclear reasons.

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