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Conflicting 'Proof' Offered Over Ukraine Plane Crash Amid Hampered Investigation

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OSCE monitors and members of a forensic team visited the plane crash site Monday and appealed to separatists to allow the bodies to be removed.

HRABOVE, Ukraine / MOSCOW — As the fallout over the crash of Malaysia Airlines MH 17 continued into a fourth day Monday, international investigators conducting recovery efforts for the 298 victims complained of further setbacks, and Russia's Defense Ministry offered what it claimed was definitive proof of Ukraine's involvement in the tragedy.

Dutch forensic investigators who had recently arrived to a city not far from the crash site in eastern Ukraine told the armed separatists guarding train cars full of bodies from the downed jet that the train must be allowed to leave within hours.

The experts from the Dutch National Forensic Investigations Team — which specializes in victim recovery and identification — also pressed for the train cars parked near the rebel-held town of Torez to be sealed. AP journalists at the site said the smell of decay was

overwhelming.

By early evening, however, there were reports of further delays and it was unclear when the victims' bodies would arrive at their destination, the northeastern city of Kharkiv.

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reported that the latest hold-up was due to "damaged train tracks."

Repatriation a Priority

International experts headed for the crash site Monday, accompanied by monitors from the OSCE. The delegation of experts included 23 specialists from the Netherlands — which lost the most nationals in the crash — as well as two experts each from Germany and the U.S., one from Britain and three from Australia.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, whose country lost 192 citizens in the tragedy, told a news conference that repatriating the bodies was his number one priority.

More bodies were found at the sprawling crash site Monday, but the recovery effort suffered another setback with a power outage in the refrigerated train holding more than 200 of the dead.

The shambolic attempts to investigate by the pro-Russia separatists who control the verdant farmland where pieces of the plane crashed to the ground have fanned widespread international outrage, especially from the nations whose citizens were on the doomed plane.

Emergency workers piled 21 more black body bags from the blackened crash site by the side of the road Monday in Hrabove. That brought the total found to 272 of the 298 passengers and crew killed in the tragedy, according to Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

The bodies were being sent to the refrigerated railcars in the nearby town of Torez, where the other bodies are being kept. But a train engineer told The Associated Press that the cars' refrigeration had been off overnight and it was not immediately clear why. The cooling system was back up and running early Monday, he said.

'Proof' From All Sides

Ukrainian officials say the plane was shot down by a mobile missile battery from a rebel-controlled area in eastern Ukraine. They said the BUK rocket launcher was supplied from Russia and operated by Russian personnel.

The U.S. presented what it called "powerful" evidence Sunday that the rebels shot down the Boeing 777 with a Russian surface-to-air missile. That evidence included video of a rocket launcher, one surface-to-air missile missing, leaving the likely launch site; imagery showing the firing; phone calls claiming credit for the strike and phone recordings said to reveal a cover-up at the crash site.

"A buildup of extraordinary circumstantial evidence ... it is powerful here," said U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

"Russia is supporting these separatists. Russia is arming these separatists. Russia is training these separatists," he added.

Pressure has been growing on President Vladimir Putin, who the U.S. and others say has backed and armed the rebels, to rein in the insurgents in Ukraine and allow a full-scale investigation. Russia has denied backing the separatists.

Putin lashed out against those criticisms again Monday, accusing others of exploiting the downing of the plane for "mercenary objectives."

Putin said Russia was doing everything possible to allow a team of experts from the International Civil Aviation Organization, a UN agency, to investigate the scene.

The Russian Defense

On Monday, Russia's Defense Ministry also hit back, upping the stakes at a news conference in Moscow with claims that its satellites had detected a Ukrainian fighter jet near the Malaysia Airlines plane at the time of the incident.

A live streaming video of the presser showed Air Force Chief of Staff Igor Makushev and operational head of the General Staff Andrei Kartapolov presenting the ministry's findings, complete with intricate diagrams. Kartapolov said a Ukrainian fighter jet had been flying not far from Malaysia Airlines MH17 at the time of the incident, and questioned why a military aircraft had been flying along a civil aviation route.

He also said Russian satellites had picked up on a U.S. satellite in the vicinity at the time and called on the U.S. to share the images it recorded.

"Is it a coincidence that a U.S. satellite flew over Ukraine at the same time as the MH17 crash?" Kartapolov asked.

Many Russian officials reacted to the news conference with jubilance.

Crimean Prosecutor Natalya Poklonskaya wrote on Twitter, "Check and mate. Now it is definite."

Vladislav Surkov, a presidential aide once dubbed the Kremlin's gray cardinal, wrote, "If the Defense Ministry's information is confirmed, Western leaders will be forced to resign, and Ukrainian ones to hang themselves."

Compromised Evidence

With all sides — the U.S., Kiev and Moscow — now having presented what they all claim is indisputable proof of who is to blame for the tragedy, an international investigation has yet to get under way.

Experts on Monday told the AP that even if investigators were granted access now to the site, it might be too late.

"Even without any deliberate attempt at a cover-up, the crash site is already compromised

in forensic terms," said Keir Giles, an associate fellow at the Chatham House think tank.

He said a reconstruction of the aircraft fuselage and wings would show how the missile struck the plane and what type it was.

"If any aircraft parts have already been removed ... this compromises the objectivity of the investigation," he said.

The United Nations Security Council was preparing to vote on a resolution on the crash on Monday evening.

Russia submitted its own suggestions for inclusion into the resolution, including the requirement for an "impartial international investigation," according to UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin.

(AP, MT)

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