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Separatists Hand Over Black Boxes, Bodies From Ukrainian Crash Site

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A guard stands on a train carrying the remains of victims of Malaysia Airlines MH17 downed over rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine after it arrived in the city of Kharkiv.

Representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic relinquished the black boxes from Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 that crashed in eastern Ukraine last week to Malaysian authorities early Tuesday morning as hundreds of bodies from the crash site were taken away by train.

A statement published on the Russian Foreign Ministry's website on Tuesday said that Russia was pleased that the black boxes had been handed to Malaysian authorities but hoped they would be analyzed by the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organization, headquartered in Montreal, where Russian experts could take part in the investigation. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian government released a statement on its website saying that the black boxes would be examined in Britain.

The bodies of 282 victims were moved to Kharkiv, a city that has been largely spared from the ongoing clashes between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists, 300 kilometers northwest from the crash site. Oleksander Kharchenko, a spokesman for Ukraine's committee on the crash, said it would "do its best" to send the bodies to the Netherlands, where most of the 298 on board the plane were from, for forensic examination by the end of the day, Reuters reported.

When questioned about the four-day delay in handing over the black boxes to Malaysian authorities, Sergei Kavtaradze, a spokesman for the self-appointed prime minister of the pro-Russian Donetsk People's Republic, denied holding onto evidence and impeding the investigation.

"We did not stall the handing over of the black boxes," Kavtaradze told The Moscow Times on Tuesday. "We wanted to hand the black boxes [to the Malaysian authorities] in person. And the delegation arrived only yesterday."

Last week, unconfirmed media reports had said the black boxes were on their way to Moscow, a move that would likely have sparked controversy.

Unrestricted Access

At a meeting of Russia's Security Council, President Vladimir Putin repeated Tuesday that Russia would do everything in its capacity to ensure an impartial investigation into the crash and to stabilize the situation in Ukraine.

"We are called on to exert our influence on the militia in southern Ukraine," Putin said. "I repeat that we will do everything that is in our power."

Despite international calls for a cease-fire, clashes between Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatists have continued to ravage the Donetsk region. At least five people were killed in clashes at the Donetsk railway station on Monday, Reuters reported.

A statement published on the Kremlin's website on Tuesday said that both Putin and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who have discussed the crash by telephone several times in the past few days, had stressed in their latest exchange "the importance of providing experts with direct and full access to the site of the tragedy," which is 60 kilometers away from heavy military altercations.

Ahead of the unanimous adoption Monday of a UN Security Council resolution on providing investigators unrestricted access to the crash site, Western leaders and international observers accused pro-Russian separatists of hindering the investigation, accusations the insurgents have denied.

"The situation has been under control since the very start," Kavtaradze said. "The security of the crash site was never an issue. The foreign delegations that have arrived here have praised us for our quick work at the site. No one had any complaints."

The OSCE said Monday that 14 of its monitors and three Dutch forensic experts had visited the crash site "accompanied by armed guards provided by the so-called Donetsk People's

Republic." The OSCE said the Dutch forensics team had assessed the recovery operation of the bodies as "good."

Criminal Case

The Netherlands Public Prosecution Service has opened a criminal case on suspicion of murder, war crimes and intentionally downing an airliner, Reuters reported. At least 193 Dutch nationals were among the 298 passengers and crew on board Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17.

Wim de Bruin, spokesman for the Prosecutor's Office, confirmed that a criminal case had been launched but said he could not provide further information when contacted by The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

According to its law on international crimes, the Netherlands can prosecute any individual who is suspected of perpetrating a war crime against a Dutch national.

See also:

Malaysia Airlines Bodies and Black Boxes Removed From Ukraine Crash Site

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