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Victims of MH17 Tragedy Sent to Netherlands, Black Boxes Arrive in Britain

By Allison Quinn

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Soldiers loading coffins into cars under a Ukrainian flag on Wednesday.

The first planes transporting bodies from last week's Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 crash arrived in the Netherlands, where a day of mourning was held Wednesday for the 298 people killed in the catastrophe — more than half of whom were Dutch.

Earlier in the week, the Netherlands agreed to spearhead an international investigation to determine the causes of the crash. Most Western leaders have already pinned the blame on pro-Russian separatists in the turbulent eastern region of Ukraine. Kiev has echoed that sentiment.

On Wednesday, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk announced that Ukraine would cede full control of the investigation to the Netherlands, referring to the tragedy as "a crime

against humanity ... that will be paid for in an international court," Regnum online news agency reported.

A Long Journey Home

A solemn ceremony was held for the victims on the tarmac at the airport in the eastern city of Kharkiv, Ukraine before the first coffins were loaded by Ukrainian honorary guards onto planes sent by the Dutch air force.

The bodies arrived in the city of Eindhoven at about 4 p.m. local time (6 p.m. Moscow time), where they were met by members of the Dutch royal family and Prime Minister Mark Rutte, according to the BBC. Churches across the country rang their bells for five minutes ahead of the planes' arrival.

The first plane carried 16 coffins. A second aircraft was set to transport an additional 24 later on Wednesday.

The victims' "long journey home," as Dutch government representative Hans Docter described it in comments to Reuters, is just the beginning of what many expect to be a long and difficult investigation into the crash.

The Probe Ahead

The bodies of the victims will be examined by Dutch specialists before being returned to their loved ones, but Rutte said the identification process could take months.

Frustration has been high among the Dutch since efforts to recover the victims' bodies in Ukraine hit one obstacle after another earlier this week, with many claiming pro-Russian separatists were impeding the work of forensic experts at the wreckage site. Even at Wednesday's ceremony for crash victims in Kharkiv, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman pointed the finger at Russia for the "inhumane terrorist act," Reuters reported.

On Wednesday, Pieter Broertjes, mayor of the Dutch city of Hilversum, lashed out at President Vladimir Putin over the tragedy, calling for Putin's elder daughter, 29-year-old Maria Putina, to be deported from the country, according to The Guardian. Putina is rumored to live in Voorschoten with her boyfriend.

As speculation about who is responsible for the crash continues to mount, the identification of the victims will rule out at least one of the more far-fetched explanations for the tragedy: that those killed in the incident were already long dead and used as part of a conspiracy to allow for NATO troops to enter the territory.

This theory has been voiced by Igor Strelkov, one of the rebel leaders in the Donetsk People's Republic, and picked up by some state-run Russian media, which theorized that the bodies could have even been passengers from another Malaysia Airlines flight that went missing in early March.

Black Boxes

Meanwhile, the black box flight recorders, which will be crucial in ruling out a technical cause for the crash, were delivered to Britain on Wednesday under supervision of specialists from the International Civil Aviation Organization, according to a Ukrainian state commission set up to investigate the crash.

The commission said "the objects were presented to the Ukrainian side, but Ukraine did not touch them and they were not under control of the Ukrainian side for even a minute," Interfax reported.

On Tuesday, British Prime Minister David Cameron said Britain had agreed to take the black boxes for deciphering at the request of the Netherlands. The black boxes are set to be handed over to experts in Farnborough, about 55 kilometers southwest of London, for further data retrieval.

Rebel Meddling

Earlier, pro-Russian separatists from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine had taken possession of the boxes before handing them over to experts from Malaysia on Monday night.

The separatists have been accused of tampering with some of the plane's wreckage and going through the victims' personal belongings.

On Tuesday, a specialist from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said from the wreckage site that "uniformed men" had been seen sawing off parts of the plane.

The BBC on Wednesday issued a report with a similar claim, citing unidentified government officials as saying rebels had been seen moving bodies and placing parts from other planes among the debris.

VICE released video footage showing men taking chunks of the plane and loading it into trucks before driving off with it.

See also:

Malaysia Airlines Bodies and Black Boxes Removed From Ukraine Crash Site

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