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Ukraine Says Rebels Mistook Doomed Flight MH17 for Aeroflot Plane

By Anna Dolgov

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A serviceman loads luggage into a Malaysia Airlines plane at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, Malaysia.

Ukraine has claimed that pro-Moscow separatists downed Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 after mistaking it for a Russian Aeroflot plane that they supposedly wanted to shoot down to provide Moscow with a pretext for invading Ukraine.

The latest theory in an array of conflicting claims about the possible causes of the MH17 downing came as head of NATO urged Russia to "step back from the brink," and seems aimed at underscoring fears of a possible Russian invasion.

Ukrainian Security Service head Valentyn Nalyvaichenko said Thursday that separatists had intended to hit an Aeroflot airliner that was headed from Moscow to Larnaca, Cyprus, and whose flight path passed close to that of the Malaysian jet.

Separatists were "ordered" to position a Buk anti-aircraft missile near the village of Pervomaisk in eastern Ukraine, but because the fighters were Russian, not local, they confused two settlements with the same name and less than 100 kilometers apart, Nalyvaichenko said in a statement by his agency.

The error was crucial in two regards, according to Nalyvaichenko: It brought the fighters under the flight path of MH17, instead of Aeroflot, and also meant that the missile was fired from rebel-controlled territory instead of the other village located in a region controlled by government troops, he said.

"From the location that had been intended originally, the Aeroflot passenger plane was to be hit so that it would have fallen on territory controlled by the armed forces," Nalyvaichenko was quoted as saying by Ukraine's Liga Novosti news agency.

"This terrorist attack was cynically planned as a pretext for the beginning of overt aggression over the massive loss of life of innocent Russians," he was quoted as saying.

The security service statement also said that the agency's investigation indicated that a Russian invasion had been planned to begin on July 18 — the day after the downing of the plane — but because of the error, the plan was supposedly revised.

With Russia's troops massed at the border, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen on Thursday warned Moscow to "step back from the brink" or face "deeper, more profound, tougher" sanctions if Russia interferes further.

"Step back from the border. Do not use peacekeeping as an excuse for war-making," Rasmussen said during a visit to Kiev, according to a transcript released by NATO.

The Western defense alliance had previously warned that Russia had about 20,000 combat-ready troops lined up on Ukraine's eastern border and could invade Ukraine, citing a peacekeeping mission as a pretext.

After Russia initiated an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council meeting on what it said was the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine this week, NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said the alliance shares the "concern that Russia could use the pretext of a humanitarian or peacekeeping mission as an excuse to send troops into eastern Ukraine."

See also:

U.S. Military Team in Ukraine to Probe Downing of MH17 Plane

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