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Relatives Express Anger at Dutch Government's Handling of MH17 Probe

By The Moscow Times

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Photographs of the victims of Malaysian Airlines MH17 are screened during a national memorial at the RAI convention center in Amsterdam on Nov. 10, 2014.

AMSTERDAM — Daisy Oehlers and Bryce Fredriksz, a Dutch couple in their early 20s, were sitting near the left wing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 on their way to a holiday in Bali, when "high energy objects" — as officials later called them — struck the plane over eastern Ukraine.

Their bodies were torn apart and scattered across miles of the conflict zone below.

Three months later, Daisy's cousin Robby checked into a cheap hotel in Donetsk to start searching the area for any trace of his relatives. "There was a crater from a rocket impact just next to the nose part of the airplane," he said. "I found a blue suitcase. It wasn't hers."

Oehlers, a singer, and the relatives of as many as 50 other victims are growing increasingly

frustrated by the fact that the authorities have not helped them trace loved ones lost on July 17, when the flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot out of the sky.

All 298 passengers and crew — two-thirds of them Dutch — were killed. The Dutch government, a leading Russian trading partner, still hesitates to call it an attack.

Attempts to recover parts of the aircraft and human remains have repeatedly been called off due to fighting on the ground. Families also say the Dutch government is not giving them enough information. One law firm has said it is preparing to sue the government for negligence over its handling of the case.

Bryce and Daisy's relatives have Bryce's foot and part of a bone for Daisy, but no more. Relatives of nine people on board the Boeing 777 have no remains at all. Some families are waiting for enough body parts to hold funerals.

"How much do you need?" asked Oehlers. "30 percent? 40 percent?"

He spent three days searching the site between Donetsk and Luhansk, the rebel-held eastern Ukrainian towns that have been flashpoints in the conflict, and took a television crew to draw attention to his family's mounting anger. He said he saw signs of bombardment on the field, where stray dogs wandered. Winter is approaching. As fighting persists, the families' hopes diminish.

"You just wonder; what are they doing?" he said of the authorities. "If it was another country, they'd just grab their stuff and head out there. I don't know what the spirit of Dutch politics is, but I think they are too soft."

Held to Account

The Dutch are conducting two parallel investigations: one into the cause of the crash, and a criminal inquiry — the single largest in Dutch history. There are now 100 Dutch law enforcement officials involved in that case, including 10 prosecutors, said spokesman Wim de Bruin.

But no forensic investigators have made it to the crash site. That makes the recovery of evidence nearly impossible.

Washington says it has intelligence that overwhelmingly backs the theory that the plane was shot down by a missile fired by pro-Russian separatists. Russia denies any involvement.

Many Dutch also believe the plane was downed by rebels using missiles provided by Moscow. But their leaders, mindful of the country's heavy reliance on Russian energy, have never assigned blame. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to assert his influence over the rebels.

Pieter Omtzigt, legislator with the opposition Christian Democratic Appeal party and a member of the foreign affairs committee, says the government is not being open enough.

He submitted a list of 43 questions about the disaster, of which he said 29 went unanswered, including one about Russian and Ukrainian cooperation and whether crash investigators had

access to key U.S. intelligence.

"On all these questions, we haven't had an answer," he said in an interview. "I want to see full proof — if you kill 298 people you have to be held accountable."

"Come Get Me!"

The challenges facing the Dutch investigators are extreme.

The closest comparison is the bombing of Pan Am flight 103, over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, which killed 254 people. The investigation, conducted in peacetime Scotland, took three years, during which 4 million pieces of evidence were recovered from a crash site spanning 2,000 sq km (770 sq miles). It took a decade to go to trial.

"We searched rivers, lochs and reservoirs and recovered many personal effects, pieces of aircraft and debris, as well as other much more difficult 'recoveries' I'd rather not go into here," said one police diver involved in the search.

Even then, the trial of two Libyan intelligence agents, at a specially constituted Scottish court in a disused Dutch military base, secured only one conviction. To this day, many relatives are convinced that the man eventually convicted was innocent.

In the Netherlands, Rutte is under growing pressure: his popularity has dropped since the MH17 crash.

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