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Claim That Russian Sniper Shot British Terrorist in Ukraine Under Scrutiny

By Allison Quinn

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A rebel looks through the scope of his sniper rifle in eastern Ukraine.

A dubious Russian news report claiming that an infamous suspected Islamist terrorist known as the "White Widow" was recently killed in Ukraine by a volunteer Russian sniper has reportedly caused a stir in British security circles.

British national Samantha Lewthwaite — a.k.a. the White Widow — has been on Interpol's most wanted list since 2013, when various media reports tied her to a brutal terror attack in Nairobi — a link that has never been officially confirmed. Kenyan authorities have been seeking Lewthwaite since 2011 for conspiracy to commit a felony and possession of explosives.

Citing "existing data" but no source, Moscow-based news agency Regnum reported Wednesday that Lewthwaite had been fighting alongside Ukraine's Aidar battalion, in support of Kiev government forces when she was gunned down by a Russian volunteer fighting with the rebels in Luhansk.

There has been no official confirmation of the Regnum news agency's claim.

In an apparent attempt to substantiate his claim, the journalist who wrote the report, Alexei Toporov, posted to Facebook on Thursday a scanned copy of a counterfeit South African passport that Lewthwaite allegedly used to enter Ukraine. The document features the name Natalie Faye, alongside a headshot of Lewthwaite herself.

Notably, the same photograph was published by Reuters in the aftermath of the Nairobi attack in 2013.

Toporov, who makes no secret of his rebel-friendly stance on his Facebook page, offered no further details on Lewthwaite's death or where her body was, saying only that she — "the scum that organized the attack on a shopping center in Nairobi" — had been working as a sniper alongside Ukrainian fighters.

"She killed a lot of our guys," Toporov wrote on Facebook, adding that "they say her death wasn't a quick one, which is the way it should have been."

A representative of the Aidar battalion quickly denied Toporov's claims. Andriy Lazarenko, a spokesman for the pro-Ukrainian group, said that the report was blatantly untrue, and that the battalion only accepts fighters who hold Ukrainian passports.

Lazarenko told The Moscow Times that the report was "just the latest Kremlin propaganda."

Still, British news agency ITV on Thursday cited an unidentified spokesperson for the Foreign Office as saying counter-terrorism officials had launched a probe into Regnum's claims.

"We are aware of reports that Samantha Lewthwaite has been killed in Ukraine," the spokesperson was cited as saying. ITV noted, however, that numerous security officials had voiced skepticism regarding the Russian news report.

Lewthwaite, widow of 7/7 London suicide bomber Germaine Lindsay, rose to international infamy after having been linked in widespread media reports to a grisly 2013 terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya's upscale Westgate mall, which shocked the world with its brutality.

The attack lasted for three days and saw at least 67 people killed, including women and children. Another 175 people were injured. The Somali-based Islamic extremist group al-Shabab claimed responsibility for that attack, which Lewthwaite is rumored to have been involved in.

Apart from Regnum, the only other Russian media outlet to proclaim Lewthwaite's death in Ukraine was the Novorossia information agency, which is run by the rebels in eastern Ukraine.

The report emerged as NATO warned of an increase in Russian troops in Ukraine, with NATO's supreme commander in Europe, General Philip Breedlove, on Wednesday saying there had been a massive buildup of Russian troops heading for Ukraine in the past two days, the BBC reported.

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