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Villagers Tell Their Story on MH17 Downing Over Eastern Ukraine

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Dutch investigators and an Emergencies Ministry member work at the site where the downed Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 crashed.

Villagers in eastern Ukraine have said they saw a missile flying directly overhead just before a Malaysian airliner was shot out of the sky on July 17 last year, providing the most detailed accounts to date that suggest it was fired from territory held by pro-Russian rebels.

The accounts from four villagers of Chervonyi Zhovten, which was then, and is now, controlled by the rebels, are significant because they indicate the rocket was in the early stages of its flight path.

That would mean it must have been launched from rebel ground nearby, challenging the suggestion of Moscow and the separatists that the plane was brought down by the Ukrainian military. At the time, the nearest Ukrainian-held area was about 3.7 miles away.

Ukraine and its Western allies have said it was the rebels who shot down the airliner, using a Russian-made BUK anti-aircraft missile system. All 298 people on board were killed.

Until now, videos, photographs and accounts from residents have pointed to a BUK battery being delivered to the rebel-held town of Snizhne, 7 km north of Chervonyi Zhovten, on July 17, and then driven away from the area some time later. Its precise location at the time the plane was shot down has never been confirmed.

Now one of the villagers has said that a missile battery was positioned in a field near Chervonyi Zhovten on the day the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777, en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, crashed to earth. A former rebel fighter corroborated this.

Ukraine's defense ministry declined to comment for this story. A top rebel commander, Andrei Purgin, said the separatists did not have any weapon capable of downing a plane at cruise altitude.

"You can come up with whatever you want. The most that we, the rebels, were operating is the PZRK [shoulder-launched missile system]. The ceiling for the PZRK is up to 4 kilometers," he said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said it was up to a Dutch-led international investigation to determine what happened. "The Russian side awaits that information impatiently," he said.

The downing of the plane was a turning point in the conflict in Ukraine, in which around 6,000 people have been killed since last April. It persuaded many Western governments that the Russian-backed rebels were a dangerous threat and stiffened their resolve to impose new sanctions on separatist leaders and on Moscow.

Digging Potatoes

On the afternoon of July 17, Valentina Kovalenko was digging up potatoes in her garden in Chervonyi Zhovten, a village whose name translates as Red October in honour of Russia's Communist revolution of 1917.

"It took off, at first we thought that a plane was crashing. But it was a rocket," said Kovalenko, 45, who then saw what she thought was smoke coming from the 'Progress' mine in Torez, a town 9.5 kilometers away to the north-west.

Her daughter Anastasia Kovalenko, 14, said she saw a rocket flying over the village, and then a plane in the distance blowing up.

Olga Krasilnikova, 30, also said she saw a rocket, some time between 4 and 5 p.m. "I saw it was flying, flew right over me. From that side," she said, pointing to the outskirts of the village, "I saw smoke in the sky, then I heard an explosion and I saw a huge blue [cloud of] smoke."

MH17, flying over eastern Ukraine towards the Russian border, came down around 4:20 p.m. local time. The biggest concentration of debris was found near Hrabove, about 20 kilometers from Chervonyi Zhovten. Older BUK rockets have a range of around 25 to 35 kilometers; the most modern can reach up to 45 kilometers.

Since last July, gaining access to the village has been difficult because of fighting

in surrounding areas, but some were able to reach Chervonyi Zhovten in February.

"My mother and I were in the yard when it happened," said Pyotr Fedotov, a 58-year-old resident. "There was such a bang that we involuntarily sat down, in the yard, our legs gave way underneath us. Then we got curious and immediately went to the other side of the house to take a look."

"The rocket was here, it wiggled around, then some kind of rocket stage separated, and then, somewhere toward Lutuhyne, Torez, I saw the plane fall apart in the air. It was only later that we found out it was a Boeing," Fedotov said.

Missiles from a BUK battery can often zigzag through the air for a few seconds after launch before their onboard radar locks on and steers the missile towards the target, according to video footage of test launches posted on the Internet.

Taken together, the accounts do not conclusively prove the missile launched from near Chervonyi Zhovten was the one that brought down the airliner, because none of the villagers saw it actually being launched.

Nor could they shed light on a contention of officials in Kiev and in Western states, that the BUK missile battery was brought in from Russia and was operated by a Russian crew. Moscow has denied its military is active in eastern Ukraine.

Village Outskirts

When interviewed, Fedotov, the witness who described the 'wiggling' rocket, at first said on camera that it was fired from territory held by the Ukrainian army. Later, off camera, he said it was launched from a nearby rebel area. Asked why he had originally said the opposite, he said it was because he was afraid of the rebels.

He gave a reporter directions to a field 1.5 kilometers from the village, which he said had been identified to him by local farm workers as the point from which the missile battery had launched the rocket.

When the site was visited in February, there were no signs of any missile launch.

Russian and separatist officials have said that Ukrainian military aircraft were overhead at the time the Malaysian airliner came down. They have said that if an anti-aircraft missile was launched in the vicinity, it was to bring down a Ukrainian warplane. They have also suggested a Ukrainian fighter aircraft may have shot down the Malaysian airliner.

Washington believes that pro-Russian separatists most likely shot down the airliner "by mistake," not realizing it was a civilian passenger flight, U.S. intelligence officials have said...

An official of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said: "Our previous assessment still holds."

The investigation into the cause of the disaster is being led by authorities in the Netherlands, as two-thirds of those on board were Dutch. An interim report published in September which was based on data from the aircraft's black box recorders, photographic and radar evidence,

and satellite imagery, said the Boeing was brought down by "high energy objects" in its vicinity — consistent with attack from the air or the ground.

"The investigation is ongoing and for as long as it is ongoing we cannot give any conclusions," Sara Vernooij, a spokeswoman for the Dutch Safety Board which is handling the case, said when approached for comment on this story.

A former rebel from the separatist Vostok battalion, who for security reasons asked to be identified only by his first name, Igor, said that a BUK battery was in Chervonyi Zhovten on July 17, and he himself was not far from the village.

Igor said the battery's mission was to discourage Ukrainian Su-25 ground attack jets from attacking separatist targets in the area. A BUK missile had been launched against the Ukrainian jets half an hour before the Malaysia Airlines Boeing came down, forcing the Ukrainian pilots to pull out, he said.

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