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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Year After MH17 Downed, Families Want Justice

By The Moscow Times

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A wreath is placed on a cross with an inscription that reads "Save and protect" next to the site of the downed Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, near the village of Hrabove (Grabovo) in Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine, July 14, 2015.

One by one, the names of the 298 passengers and crew who died aboard Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 will be read aloud by relatives on Friday, a year after the passenger jet was shot out of the sky over rebel-held eastern Ukraine.

Commemorations in the Netherlands and Ukraine on Friday will mark a painful milestone for the families, some of whom have had to wait until now for scattered remains to be recovered.

"We received 19 very small pieces this month," said Silene Fredriksz, whose son Bryce was in the plane with his girlfriend, Daisy. "We will never get all of them back, because they have stopped looking, but I cannot wait any longer."

Funerals for Bryce and Daisy will be held after the memorial this week, she said.

In Ukraine, the crash site near the village of Hrabove is now marked by flowers and toys brought by locals in memory of the many children who died.

"God forbid this happens here again or anywhere else," said Alexander Pereverzev, who lives just 300 meters away. "I feel so sorry for the people who died."

The tragedy marked a turning point in the conflict in eastern Ukraine between government forces and pro-Russian separatist rebels, in which more than 6,500 people have now been killed.

Western governments believe the rebels shot down the plane at cruising altitude with a Russian-supplied Buk missile system, a version based on radio intercepts, photographic and video evidence, witness statements and satellite imagery.
Russia denies involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, and Moscow and the separatists have suggested the plane was downed with a missile fired from a Ukrainian fighter jet, something Kiev denies.

In comments last year, a Russian deputy minister also appeared to allow for the possibility that rebels had shot down MH17 in a failed attempt to hit a Ukrainian military plane.

Dutch authorities have said they are not yet ready to identify culprits, but have called for a U.N. tribunal.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday said that would be "counterproductive and premature," putting Moscow directly at odds with the Netherlands, Malaysia, Belgium, Australia and Ukraine, which are part of the criminal inquiry.

A report on the cause of the crash from the Dutch Safety Board, a preliminary copy of which has been circulated to half a dozen government with nationals onboard, is due in October.

"They Cannot Get Away With This"

But as the international investigation drags on, the patience of the relatives is wearing thin. Families from several countries have started lawsuits against the airline on the grounds that, unlike some other carriers, it continued to operate flights over a conflict zone where rebels were known to be using anti-aircraft weapons.

At the time, Malaysia's transport minister said MH17 was on an approved international flight path, at the approved altitude, and quoted European aviation authority Eurocontrol as saying 75 airlines had flown the same route in the two days before the disaster.

"They cannot get away with this. They cannot just shoot a civilian aircraft out of the sky. Somebody has to be held accountable," Fredriksz said.

The bereaved mother complains of a lack of transparency from the Dutch government, and fears that conflicting interests will get in the way of justice. "I am not sure we will officially ever know who was behind this. There are too many political and economic interests."

The deaths of nearly 200 Dutch nationals on the plane have struck deep in the psyche of the nation of 17 million people. Opinion polls suggest a majority of the population holds Russia responsible.

Diplomatic relations with Moscow have deteriorated, and the government is rethinking its reliance on Russian energy.

On Thursday, the port of Rotterdam, Europe's largest, said plans to build an oil storage terminal for 1 billion euros with a Russian investor had been scrapped. Last year, the Dutch backed out of plans to invest in a multi-billion euro pipeline to bring Russian gas to Europe.

Stop and Pray

Near Hrabove, located between the two rebel strongholds of Luhansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, a makeshift memorial has been erected in a charred field.

A Russian sign reads: "Stop and pray. Feel the minutes run. The Boeing crashed here. And in a horrible moment. It took somebody's life away."

In eastern Ukraine, witnesses are also eagerly awaiting the results of the Dutch investigation into who was behind the plane's downing.

Here too, the dead will be honored in a ceremony on Friday. A priest will walk to the crash site and a modest monument, funded by the local rebel government, will be unveiled.

In Russia, paper planes with names of the dead were to be taken to the Dutch embassy in Moscow on Friday morning.

A steady stream of relatives of the victims have visited eastern Ukraine in search of belongings, or to see for themselves where they lost their loved ones.

"Despite long distances, we feel empathy and mourn the death of innocent people," said Vladimir Berezhnoy, a local administrator.

He recalled a visit from a Dutch musician who lost a sibling in the disaster.

"He looked for his brother, tried to find anything that belonged to him. He came to our office, played piano. He was not angry," he said.

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