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UK Inquiry Head Criticizes Russians in ex-KGB Spy's London Murder

By The Moscow Times

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Former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko.

LONDON — The head of a British inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned with a radioactive isotope in London in 2006, accused Russian authorities and a Russian man suspected of murdering the ex-KGB spy of trying to undermine his probe.

British authorities say there is evidence to prove Dmitry Kovtun, along with fellow Russian Andrei Lugovoy, poisoned Kremlin critic Litvinenko with green tea laced with polonium-210 at the Millennium Hotel in central London.

Before his death, Litvinenko accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of ordering his killing but the Kremlin has always denied any role, as have Lugovoy and Kovtun, whom Russia has refused to extradite.

Kovtun had been due to start giving evidence from Moscow by video link to the British public

inquiry on Monday but said he could no longer take part because he needed permission from the Russian authorities or he risked committing an offense.

Robert Owen, the senior judge overseeing the inquiry, had given Kovtun until 9 a.m. on Tuesday to agree to testify, but the Russian businessman failed to appear.

"This unhappy sequence of events drives me to the conclusion that either Mr. Kovtun has never in truth intended to give evidence and this has been a charade," Owen said.

"Alternatively, if he has at some stage been genuine in his expressed intention to give evidence, obstacles have been put in the way of his doing."

He said Kovtun's actions cast doubt on "the credibility of anything else he says" and he criticized the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (ICRF) for failing to raise problems about Kovtun giving evidence at an earlier stage.

He also said the ICRF had tried to limit what Kovtun could have testified about, which Owen said was an unacceptable attempt to "restrict and distort" evidence.

"That would be an unwarranted interference. I will not allow my duty to investigate to be subverted," said Owen who has previously said there was a "prima facie case" indicating Russian involvement in Litvinenko's death.

Kovtun himself told a news conference in April that Litvinenko, whose death helped drag relations between Moscow and London to new post-Cold War lows, might have killed himself accidentally while handling polonium.

The public inquiry is due to issue its report into the death by the end of the year.

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