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Trial of Ukrainian Pilot Savchenko Begins in Russia

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Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko

A Russian court on Tuesday began hearing the high-profile case against a Ukrainian officer who is charged in the deaths of two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine.

Nadezhda Savchenko denied the charges, telling the court "I am a soldier, not a murderer," the TASS news agency reported.

Russian investigators allege that Savchenko, who served in a volunteer battalion fighting with government troops against Russia-backed rebels, provided the coordinates for a mortar attack that killed the journalists in June 2014.

Savchenko, who lawyers say was captured by the rebels and smuggled across the border into Russia, is also charged with entering Russia illegally.

Charges of attempted murder in relation to six Ukrainian citizens were also added to the case.

Prosecutors told the court on Tuesday that Savchenko intentionally targeted the journalists

and other civilians, while the defense insisted the journalists were killed during an attack on separatist fighters, Russian news agencies reported.

"I didn't see journalists," TASS quoted Savchenko as saying. "I have never in my life shot at unarmed people. I am a soldier, not a murderer."

Savchenko, who spent 83 days on a hunger strike to protest her detention, has become a hero figure for Ukrainians fighting the separatists. Ukrainian officials have campaigned for her release.

The trial was being held in the small southern Russian town of Donetsk, which has the same name as the Ukrainian city that is the main rebel stronghold.

Reporters and photographers were barred from the courtroom and watched the proceedings by video link.

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