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MH17: In Search of Justice

Russia's denials and obfuscation show a lack of respect for the victims' relatives.

By Piet Ploeg

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Anton Novoderzhkin / TASS

On July 17, 2014, I lost my brother, his wife and his son.

They were among the 298 innocent victims who lost their lives that day in a cowardly and gruesome assault, when a Russian Buk missile shot down Flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine. More than four years later, relatives of the victims are still being left out in the cold by Russia's leadership.

In the wake of the tragedy, the process of repatriating the bodies, identifying them and saying goodbye — to the extent that that is possible — has been lengthy and painful.

It has been an ordeal to establish the exact course of events and the identities of those

responsible. For many relatives, including me, this is an important part of coming to terms with this horrible event and our loss. The international community, too, was shocked. It needs to see that this inhumane act will not to go unpunished and that something like it will not happen again.

Having stood on the sidelines for more than four years, a large group of relatives, myself included, can no longer stand by and watch. We want legal action.

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In November, we filed a lawsuit against Russia at the European Court of Human Rights. We did this because we want an independent legal body to issue a ruling on Russia's role in the downing of MH17 and for justice to be served.

In May, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), which is conducting the criminal investigation on behalf of the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine, made public some evidence it has of Russia's involvement in the incident.

The Dutch Safety Board and the investigative journalist collective Bellingcat had already proven the involvement of Ukrainian separatists and Russia in this heinous crime. The United Nations Security Council confirmed the JIT's findings and has called upon Russia several times to admit its role.

Russia, however, denies all responsibility and has done nothing but obstruct the investigations by peddling alternative theories involving Ukraine, giving incorrect information or withholding it. Of course, Ukraine can be accused of failing to close its airspace, but there has so far been zero evidence to suggest that it downed MH17.

We, the relatives, have become puppets in Russia's geopolitical theater. Over and over again, the Russian authorities have rubbed salt in our wounds. Human remains are still being "found" in impossible locations, and only being returned to mourning relatives after endless bureaucracy. My own brother is one of two victims whose remains were never found.

It shows that neither the Russian authorities nor the separatists have any respect for the sanctity of human life or the victims' relatives. We, therefore, have no choice but to take legal action against the Russian state so that justice will triumph and to honor the memory of those we love.

Related article: Russia Downplays Dutch-Led Investigation Into the Downing of MH17

Our patience is being tested. The JIT is sparing neither cost nor effort to find the culprits and bring them to justice, but that investigation is complex and will take a long time. Meanwhile, the Dutch and Australian governments are attempting to continue talking to Russia, and pressure it into taking some responsibility. Legal steps are seen as a last resort.

It is a good thing that relatives feel supported by the JIT and their governments and I am closely following the process from the sidelines. But for me, and for many others, this is not enough.

With our lawsuit at the ECHR, we want to make our own contribution. We want Russia to see that we will not give in until justice is served. We want to let the world know who is responsible for this infinite pain and send a signal that such violence cannot be tolerated.

In 2019, we will commemorate our loved ones for the fifth time and look back on five difficult years. We know here will be many more years of complicated legal procedures before justice triumphs.

Why? Because states like Russia are too proud and stubborn to admit to their mistakes at the expense of the victims and their relatives, despite the international community's indignation.

I still believe that an independent investigation will eventually result in a verdict issued by an independent Dutch court, with or without the suspects present. The world must know who is responsible for this tragedy.

The only thing that can make the deaths of our loved ones any worse is if no lessons are learned.

Piet Ploeg is the chairman of the MH17 Disaster Foundation. The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the editorial position of The Moscow Times.

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