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Investigators Name 4 Top Suspects Behind MH17 Crash

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Robin van Lonkhuijsen / TASS

A team of international prosecutors has launched the first criminal proceedings against four suspects in the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 near the Russia-Ukraine border nearly five years ago.

MH17 was shot down in July 2014 over territory held by pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people onboard. Investigators have said that the plane was shot down by a Russian missile, a claim Moscow has repeatedly rejected.

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The Dutch-led international team tasked with assigning criminal responsibility for the plane's downing has opened criminal cases against Russian nationals Igor Girkin, Sergei Dubinsky and Oleg Pulatov, as well as Ukrainian national Leonid Kharchenko, said the chief Dutch prosecutor, Fred Westerbeke, during a press conference Wednesday.

The court hearings against the suspects will begin on March 9, 2020, Westerbeke said. The four men have been charged with causing the crash of MH17 and with murdering its passengers.

The Joint Investigation Team (JIT) will not seek extradition because the constitutions of both Russia and Ukraine forbid extradition of their nationals, Westerbeke said. It will instead ask Moscow to arrest and question Girkin, Dubinsky and Pulatov.

The investigation team said Girkin was a former FSB colonel who served as minister of defense of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) in the summer of 2014.

It said Dubinsky was head of the military intelligence agency of DNR, while Pulatov was head of a second department of the DNR military intelligence agency. Ukrainian national Kharchenko was head of a reconnaissance battalion for the second department, it said.

The investigation also released a wiretapped phone call between Putin aide Vladislav Surkov and former DNR head Alexander Borodai in which they discuss Russia providing military assistance.

Investigators have collected enough evidence to show that Russia provided the missile launcher used to shoot down MH17, Westerbeke said.

The JIT had informed victims' families of the progress in the case before presenting their findings to the media on Wednesday morning.

Moscow has said it does not trust the investigation.

"Russia was unable to take part in the investigation despite expressing an interest right from the start and trying to join it," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters ahead of the team's announcement on Wednesday.

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The Netherlands has said Russia has not cooperated with the investigation and Moscow is not expected to surrender the suspects. Dutch authorities have said the suspects may be tried in absentia.

The Bellingcat investigative website on Wednesday said it had identified a number of separatist fighters who were responsible for misidentifying MH17 as a target and for the escort and deployment of the Buk missile launcher that downed the airplane.

The group includes Russian military and intelligence officers and Ukrainian separatists. Bellingcat said it was not yet clear who exactly gave the order to shoot the airplane down.

Prosecutors have previously said the missile system that brought down the plane came from the Russian 53rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade, based in the western Russian city of Kursk.

They said their next step would be to identify individual culprits and to attempt to put them on trial.

The Russian government denies having lent any support to pro-Russia rebels fighting Ukrainian government troops and also denies any involvement in shooting down the plane.

Last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin called MH17's downing a "terrible tragedy" but said that Moscow was not to blame and that there are other explanations for what happened.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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