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MH17 Suspect Admits 'Moral Responsibility' for Downing Jet

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Igor Girkin is one of three Russian suspects who, along with one Ukrainian suspect, are accused of shooting down MH17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. **Dmitry Lovetsky / AP / TASS**

A Russian suspect in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 has said he feels "a moral responsibility" for the deaths of 298 people but refused to admit to downing the passenger jet, Britain's The Times newspaper reported Wednesday.

Igor Girkin, 49, is one of three Russian suspects who, along with one Ukrainian suspect, are accused by a Dutch-led investigation of shooting down MH17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, during the war between pro-Russian separatists and Kiev. None of the defendants, who are also charged with murdering MH17's passengers, are expected to attend their trial in the Netherlands, which has been suspended until June.

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"In as much as I was the commander of the rebels and a participant in the conflict, I feel a

moral responsibility for these deaths," Girkin told The Times.

Girkin, a Russian army veteran and ex-Federal Security Service (FSB) officer, was adamant that the pro-Russian separatists under his command "did not bring down the plane."

As a former defense minister in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and close adviser to annexed Crimea's Russia-backed government, Girkin is believed to be the most senior military officer in the area who was in direct contact with Russia at the time of the plane's downing. Girkin now lives in Moscow, where he has been spotted on a number of occasions.

His remarks to The Times follow an interview with Ukrainian media personality Dmitry Gordon which sparked public outrage in Ukraine. Gordon said Monday that he had interviewed Girkin and former Crimean prosecutor and current Russian lawmaker Natalia Poklonskaya "in collaboration" with Ukraine's special services.

"No one has ever done such interviews before, and no one in Ukraine has ever interviewed Poklonskaya or Girkin regarding treason and crimes committed with [their] participation," Gordon said in response to the criticism.

One of the families of MH17's Australian victims reportedly criticized Girkin's admission of moral guilt.

Asked by The Times if his words could be interpreted as an admission of the Russian military's guilt, Girkin said "people can interpret this as they like" and refused to comment further.

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