The Moscow Times
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Dutch Prosecutors Say MH17 Suspects 'Served Military Interests'

By Danny Kemp for AFP and Jan Hennop for AFP

December 20, 2021

Public prosecutors Ward Ferdinandusse and Thijs Berger stand prior to prosecutors' indictment in the criminal trial in Amsterdam over the downing of flight MH17. **Sem van der Wal / ANP / AFP**

Dutch prosecutors said Monday that four suspects accused of downing a Malaysia Airlines flight with a surface-to-air missile were seeking to serve "their own military interests," as they launched closing arguments in the closely-watched trial.

Four suspects are being tried in absentia for launching a BUK missile that hit flight MH17 over war-torn eastern Ukraine in 2014, killing all 298 people on board.

Prosecutors launched closing arguments in the trial Monday, saying the four suspects played pivotal roles in securing the BUK system, which was most likely intended to strike a Ukrainian war plane.

"If this was the intention, that doesn't change the accusation of making it a criminal act,"

public prosecutor Thijs Berger told the judges.

"A mistake in target also makes no difference to the evidence that such a crime has been committed."

The suspects "used a BUK missile as a tool to serve their own military interest and hit MH17 with it," he added.

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International investigators say the BUK missile was originally brought from a Russian military base, ostensibly to be used in the fight against Ukrainian forces.

Berger said the men on trial "did not press the button themselves, but... used it for their armed struggle with the aim of destroying an aircraft."

The four suspects on trial are Russian nationals Igor Girkin, Sergei Dubinsky and Oleg Pulatov, and Ukrainian citizen Leonid Kharchenko.

All four have refused to appear in court in the Netherlands and are being tried in absentia.

'Maximum penalty'

In three days of hearings this week, the prosecution are formally charging the four suspects and will set out their sentencing demands.

A verdict at the high-security court, near Amsterdam's Schiphol airport where MH17 took off on its doomed flight to Kuala Lumpur, is not expected until late 2022 at the earliest.

"The maximum penalty is life imprisonment," a court spokesperson told AFP.

The hearings come as fresh tensions soar over Ukraine, with the West accusing Moscow of planning an invasion.

Girkin, 49, also known by his pseudonym "Strelkov," is the most high-profile suspect — a former Russian spy and historical re-enactment fan who helped kickstart the war in Ukraine.

Dubinsky, 57, who has also been linked with Russian intelligence, allegedly served as the separatists' military intelligence chief.

Pulatov, 53, was an ex-Russian special forces soldier and one of Dubinsky's deputies.

Kharchenko, 48, allegedly led a separatist unit in eastern Ukraine.

'Corrupt' Russia

Pulatov is the only suspect to be represented by lawyers.

Prosecutors will spend Monday and Tuesday explaining evidence including telephone and electronic eavesdropping, the circumstances surrounding the missile, and the defendants themselves.

The sentencing demand is expected to follow on Wednesday and will include an "extensive justification of the requested penalty," the spokesperson said.

Prosecutors said during the opening of the trial in March 2020 that if the court passed a sentence "we will do everything in our power to ensure that it is enforced, whether in the Netherlands or elsewhere."

The trial heard harrowing testimony from relatives earlier this year, who spoke of the heartbreak of the loss of children, parents and siblings, and called on "corrupt" Russia to provide justice.

Kiev has been battling a pro-Moscow insurgency in two breakaway regions bordering Russia since 2014, when the Kremlin annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula.

Western nations imposed tough sanctions on Russia amid international outrage over the shooting down of flight MH17.

Russia has recently massed troops near Ukraine's borders and the West has for weeks accused it of planning an invasion, warning Moscow of massive sanctions should it launch an attack.

Moscow denies the claims, with President Vladimir Putin seeking talks with U.S. counterpart Joe Biden and security guarantees to stand down his troops.

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