

# Dutch Judges to Give Long-Awaited Flight MH17 Verdict

By [Danny Kemp for AFP](#)

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Ukrainian emergencies workers at the site of the plane wreckage in July 2014. **Alexander Ermochenko / Zuma / TASS**

A Dutch court delivers its verdict Thursday in the trial of four men over the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 above Ukraine in 2014, as tensions soar over Russia's invasion eight years later.

The suspects — Russians Igor Girkin, Sergei Dubinsky, Oleg Pulatov and Ukrainian Leonid Kharchenko — will not be in court as they have refused to attend the two-and-a-half-year trial.

They are charged with the murder of all 298 passengers and crew who died when the Boeing 777 flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was hit over separatist-held eastern Ukraine by what investigators say was a missile supplied by Moscow.

Prosecutors have demanded life sentences for the suspects although the men are unlikely to serve time if convicted.

The suspects were allegedly part of Kremlin-backed forces and had key roles in bringing the BUK missile from a military base in Russia and deploying it to the launch site — even if they did not pull the trigger.

Relatives have traveled from around the world to listen to the three-judge panel read out the verdict from 12:30 p.m. GMT at a high-security court near Schiphol Airport, where the doomed plane took off on July 17, 2014.

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The verdict would "tell us a lot about the role of Russia, and the responsibility of Russia," Piet Ploeg, chairman of the MH17 foundation, who lost his brother, sister-in-law and nephew, told AFP outside court.

"I don't believe in terms of closure — ask relatives who lost their children, you will never find closure for that. But I really hope that this day will give families some space to try to get on with their lives."

#### **'Hunt them down'**

The trial represents the end of a long search for justice for the victims of MH17, who came from 10 countries, including 196 Dutch, 43 Malaysians and 38 Australians.

"If they are guilty, the international community should hunt them down," Evert van Zijtveld, who lost his daughter Frederique, 19, his son Robert-Jan, 18, and his parents-in-law, told AFP.

The crash triggered global outrage and sanctions against Moscow, with Ukraine's famed sunflower fields littered with bodies and wreckage. Some victims, including children, were still strapped into their seats after the plane was blasted out of the sky.

Eight years later, the region where MH17 crashed has become one of the key battlegrounds in Russia's nearly nine-month-old war in Ukraine.

The MH17 trial has meanwhile emerged as a something test case for efforts to bring perpetrators to justice over war crimes in Ukraine since 2014.

The trial opened in March 2020 with a somber reading of the names of all 298 victims. The court also visited the twisted wreckage of the plane, which has been reconstructed at a Dutch military base.

Three of the suspects are formally being tried in absentia, while Pulatov has had legal representation at the trial and made a video statement in which he said he was not guilty.

Prosecutors say Girkin, 51, a former Russian spy who became the so-called defense minister of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic, was in contact with Russia to obtain the missile

system.

He has denied the rebels were involved in downing MH17.

## **Backdrop of war**

Girkin recently criticized the Russian military over its handling of this year's invasion and reportedly volunteered to fight in Ukraine.

Dubinsky, 60, who has also been tied to Russian intelligence, allegedly served as the separatists' military intelligence chief and was responsible for giving orders about the missile.

Pulatov, 56, an ex-Russian special forces soldier, and Kharchenko, 50, who allegedly led a separatist unit, were subordinates who played a more direct role in transporting the missile, prosecutors said.

The BUK missile had been identified as coming from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade from Kursk in Russia, the court heard.

Defense lawyers say the trial has been unfair.

They say prosecutors failed to prove a BUK missile brought down the jetliner, and have brought up "alternative scenarios" such as that a Ukrainian jet shot it.

Moscow has denied all involvement. It has refused to extradite any of the suspects, saying it is illegal under Russian law.

The verdict comes against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has sparked fears of a wider international war.

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