

Russia Backs UN Resolution for Access to Ukraine Plane Crash Site

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July 22, 2014



Netherlands' Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans (R) shakes hands with Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations Vitaly Churkin before a Security Council meeting at the United Nations headquarters in New York, July 21, 2014.

UNITED NATIONS — The UN Security Council has unanimously adopted a resolution calling for an international investigation into the Malaysia Airlines plane crash in Ukraine, with Moscow's envoy urging other countries to avoid jumping to conclusions — and then proceeding to slam Ukraine.

Russia, which has been blamed by Ukraine and the West for downing the Malaysian airliner last Thursday in eastern Ukraine, was among the 15 council members to vote in favor of a resolution on Monday demanding unrestricted access to the crash site for international investigators.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin said his country is "ready to provide any

necessary assistance in organizing an impartial international investigation."

"But until its completion, it is important to refrain from rushed conclusions and politicized statements," Churkin said.

However, he then immediately followed his own call to refrain from politicized rhetoric with an onslaught against Ukraine: "Kiev is trying to use the shock that the international community is experiencing over the loss of the Malaysian airliner to boost its punitive operation in the east of the country," Churkin said.

"Towns are subjected to indiscriminate artillery shelling, their residents are dying by the dozens," he added.

Ukraine-Russia Stand-Off

During Monday's meeting, Ukrainian Ambassador Yuriy Sergeyev expressed his condolences to the families of the victims and rebutted Russia's accusations of trying to use the airliner disaster for political gain.

Sergeyev said Ukraine had invited envoys from Russia and representatives of the countries affected by the downing "immediately after the crash, the same day," to participate in an investigation.

He also cited Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's declaration of a cease-fire around the crash site as evidence Ukraine had done what it could to ensure a secure investigation.

But Churkin used the Security Council floor to make a series of stabs against Ukraine's current and previous administrations.

Among other supposed evidence implicating Ukraine's involvement in the downing, he mentioned Ukraine's shooting down in 2001 of a Siberian Airlines plane that was carrying 78 people en route from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk.

Although Ukraine has acknowledged — after a period of initial denial — that its military had shot down the airliner over the Black Sea, Churkin said Monday that "until today, Ukraine refuses to admit its legal responsibility."

"Given such a track record of Kiev, granting it the role of the 'first violin' (leader) in the investigation would be frivolous, to say the least," he said, adding that Ukraine would have "many questions to answer" during the upcoming probe.

Churkin also lashed out at the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, for neglecting to credit Russia with its supposed efforts to establish peace in Ukraine, saying that "a discussion of a tragedy should not be turned into a farce."

West Doubts Russia's Commitment

The Security Council vote came after U.S. President Barack Obama lashed out at Russia earlier Monday for failing to use its influence with separatists in Ukraine to stop them from impeding investigators' access to the crash site.

"These separatists are removing evidence from the crash site, all of which begs the question — what exactly are they trying to hide?" Obama said.

Power told the Security Council that "Russia's silence since Thursday was sending a message to the illegal armed groups in Ukraine: We have your backs."

"We are not naive: if Russia is not part of the solution, it will continue to be part of the problem," Power said.

Ahead of the vote, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott — whose government proposed the draft resolution — warned that his country would react "very, very badly" if Russia did not support the call, newspaper The Australian reported.

Yet despite international concern over Russia's supposed unwillingness to wield its influence over Ukrainian separatists, Russia did not use its veto power as a permanent member of the Security Council to block Monday's resolution.

Russia had proposed removing mentions of "armed groups" of pro-Moscow separatists from the draft resolution, but resigned itself to the term after the council refused its request.

The resolution now "demands that the armed groups in control of the crash site and the surrounding area refrain from any actions that may compromise the integrity of the crash site, including by refraining from destroying, moving, or disturbing wreckage, equipment, debris, personal belongings, or remains."

A separate Russian request to have the resolution describe the incident as the "downing" rather than the "shooting down" of the MH17 plane was granted.

But even after Russia joined the vote, the U.S. ambassador expressed doubts Russia was truly committed to a thorough investigation.

"Even after adopting this resolution, it is worth asking if there really is consensus that this crime merits an immediate and impartial investigation," Power said. "There is one party from which we have heard too little condemnation (of earlier impediments to the investigation) — and that is Russia."

Mourning

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who had traveled to New York to address the Security Council, described the downing of the plane as an "outrage", and blocking access for international monitors' access to the crash site as "despicable."

"I cannot begin to fathom the pain and anguish their families feel," she said.

Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans also made an emotional speech.

"Since Thursday, I've been thinking how horrible must have been the final moments of their lives when they knew the plane was going down," he said. "Did they lock hands with their loved ones? Did they hold their children close to their hearts? Did they look each other in the eyes one final time in a wordless goodbye? We will never know."

The Netherlands has been shattered by the loss of 193 of its natives in the downing — the highest number of casualties among the countries whose citizens were among the 298 people aboard the MH 17.

The disaster "has left a hole in the hearts of the Dutch nation," and has caused "grief, anger and despair" — amid an "excruciatingly slow process" of recovering the remains of the victims and securing the crash site, Timmermans said.

"To my dying day, I will not understand [why] it took so much time for the rescue workers to be allowed to do their difficult jobs, and that human remains should be used in a political game," he said.

In Ukraine, a train with the remains of some 200 bodies that have been recovered from the crash site has been slowly moving across eastern regions Tuesday on its way to the Netherlands, accompanied by monitors from Malaysia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Interfax reported.

Diplomats from Australia, the Netherlands and other countries at the Security Council called for the remains to be treated with dignity.

News reports said Ukraine separatist leader and Russian citizen Aleksandr Borodai had handed over the downed aircraft's black boxes to a Malaysian envoy early on Tuesday.

See also:

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