

Russian Investigators: Witness Says Ukrainian Army Responsible for MH17 Downing

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Local workers transport wreckage from the Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 plane (flight MH17) at the site of the plane crash near the village of Hrabove (Grabovo) in Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine.

Russia's Investigative Committee has issued a statement claiming that it has proof of the Ukrainian military's involvement in the July downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, a catastrophe that shocked the international community and sent Russia's conflict with the West into overdrive.

Citing an unidentified Ukrainian soldier who deserted his fellow troops and came to Russia, investigators say the man "personally witnessed" events in Ukraine's Air Force suggesting the doomed flight was shot down by a SU-25 fighter jet controlled by the Ukrainian military.

International investigators, citizen journalists and armchair pundits have all struggled

for months to identify the culprit behind the crash that claimed 298 lives on July 17.

While many Western leaders immediately placed the blame on pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, where the plane was shot down, Russia's Defense Ministry and state-run media outlets pointed the finger at the Ukrainian military. Two state television channels even aired satellite images purportedly proving a Ukrainian fighter jet had been near the plane at the time of the incident, although the images were lambasted as as crude forgeries by specialists and foreign governments.

On Wednesday, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin offered further details to back up the claim, saying a former Ukrainian soldier had seen air-to-air missiles being loaded onto a fighter jet shortly before the Malaysia Airlines plane was obliterated.

"In normal circumstances, such missiles were never loaded onto planes when conducting operational flights," Markin said in the statement, citing the witness.

"The witness immediately directed our attention to the fact that, upon the fighter jet's return to the aerodrome, the missiles that had been loaded onto it were gone, and at that point he distinctly heard the pilot tell a colleague, 'That plane was in the wrong place at the wrong time,'" the statement said.

"The facts and information which the witness presented, very clearly and without confusion, have convinced investigators that his testimony is accurate, and a polygraph test has confirmed it," the statement said.

It continued: "Citizens of Ukraine who were living in the area in which the Boeing fell ... saw a military plane in the sky right next to the Boeing just before it crashed."

The witness will be offered state protection in Russia for the information he provided, Markin said.

"If representatives of the international commission in charge of investigating this catastrophe are truly interested in establishing the truth and they turn to us, we are ready to provide them with all the materials we have," Markin said.

Holland has led the international investigation into the tragedy, as the majority of the victims were Dutch citizens. Many of those involved in recovery efforts have expressed skepticism that the probe will be able to offer any conclusive proof, however, as evidence may have been tampered with and work at the crash site was repeatedly hindered by the ongoing conflict in the region.

In late October, Germany's foreign intelligence agency said its own investigation into the tragedy revealed that the plane had been shot down by a surface-to-air missile launched by pro-Russian separatists near Donetsk, German news website Spiegel Online reported.

An investigation conducted by a team of citizen journalists and published in November drew the same conclusion, offering satellite images, social media reports and witness testimony to back up the claim.

The results of the ongoing international investigation are expected to be released next year.

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