

Dutch government rocked by parliamentary report into 1992 El Al air crash

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A Dutch parliamentary investigation into the government's handling of the 1992 El Al crash in Amsterdam, has led to calls for the resignation of Prime Minister Wim Kok and two of his deputies. A discussion on the 2,000-page report, which accuses the Labour Party-led coalition of bungling and misleading parliament over the crash, is scheduled for next month when it will be decided what ministers, if any, should resign.

The Israeli El Al cargo plane crashed into a high-rise apartment complex in the poor district of Bijlmer on October 4, 1992, shortly after takeoff from Schipol Airport. The Boeing 747 ploughed a 150-foot hole through the 11-storey building, killing four crew members and at least 39 people. The exact death toll is still unknown since the apartment complex contained many unregistered immigrants.

The government was forced to convene a cross-party parliamentary inquiry into the crash six months ago, in response to growing public concern at the unprecedented number of chronic health complaints recorded following the incident. Some 300 people--mainly rescue workers involved at the crash scene and local residents--have complained of health problems, including neurological complaints, severe headaches and nausea.

Questions had already been raised regarding the cargo the plane was carrying on its route from the United States to Israel. Residents reported "mysterious men in white suits", going through the wreckage. Concerns that they were Mossad agents (Israeli secret service) were heightened by the fact that the plane's "black box" flight recorder has never been recovered, and El Al would not reveal the cargo manifest providing details of what was on board.

It was also reported that some 282 kilograms of

depleted uranium had been used as ballast in the plane's wings--only 152 kg of which was recovered. Finally, the Israeli government admitted last year that the jet had been carrying 190 litres of the chemical Dimethyl Methylphosphonate (DMPP), used in the production of Sarin, the deadly nerve gas invented by Nazi scientists in the 1930s. Twenty times as lethal as cyanide, Sarin kills by effectively crippling the nervous system. Just a tiny amount can kill scores of people.

The report found that Deputy Prime Minister Annemarie Jorritsma and Health Minister Els Borst had failed in their duty to protect public health and keep parliament informed of the dangers. It accused Jorritsma, who was transport minister from 1994 to 1998, of making only half-hearted attempts to recover freight documents and misinforming parliament about disparities in the papers. It also said that it was "incomprehensible" that the Bijlmer disaster and its aftermath were never discussed at cabinet level, and that Kok's failure to raise the issue "was not in keeping with his position". However, the parliamentary committee claims that it found no evidence of a government attempt to conceal details of the cargo from the public. It further claims, "The government paid too little attention to public worries, *even those that were based on misconceptions*" (emphasis added).

The two ministers had earlier said they would resign if the report found them guilty of wrongdoing. However, they have subsequently refused to honour this pledge.

In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Dutch officials claimed the plane was transporting flowers and perfume. Having been forced to reveal the plane's cargo, both the Dutch and Israeli governments claimed that the chemicals on board were "non-toxic".

The parliamentary committee report--which

interviewed 80 witnesses and professional experts--maintains this fiction, describing the plane's cargo as "mundane". Whilst it acknowledges a "direct link" between the crash and subsequent health problems in the area, this is largely confined to the high incident of psychological problems reported, particularly of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

The committee notes that the wreckage burnt for one hour and smouldered for several hours more, during which toxic substances were formed. Those identified include gases and smoke particles such as sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide, hydrochloric acid, chrome, nickel, asbestos and dioxins. But it claims that "no chronic health problems" are to be expected for large numbers of people.

The committee notes that there have been 13 "auto-immune" cases reported by those in contact with the wreckage, and a further 16 cases have a "possible link". However, it concludes that it is "unlikely" that large numbers would have suffered from uranium poisoning, but "wishes to state that it cannot be ruled out that under specific circumstances some individuals inhaled uranium oxide and were tainted".

The report's acceptance that depleted uranium was used as ballast is almost fantastical. This substance has been used in the cruise missiles rained down on both Iraq and Serbia over the last period. Upon impact, the missiles release radioactive uranium oxide that is inhaled by people and can pollute the soil and food chain. Its use has been linked to the high incidence of cancer suffered by the Iraqi people following the US-led Desert Storm operation in 1991 and to Gulf War syndrome affecting many veterans.

Even more damaging politically is the revelation that the plane's cargo included DMPP. This chemical is a crucial component of the Sarin nerve gas, used by the Aum Shinri Kyo cult in an attack on the Tokyo underground system that killed six passengers and injured more than 3,000.

The Israeli government claim that it had ordered the compound for "testing filters, including protective filters", i.e., gas masks. But the El Al cargo was destined for the "Israeli Institute for Biological Research" near Tel Aviv. In September 1998 the *Times* of London described the facility as a "shadowy biological institute.... Believed by many foreign diplomats to be one of the most advanced germ warfare

institutions in the Middle East." One month later a report by *Times* journalist Uzi Mahnaimi alleged that Israeli assault aircraft crews had been trained to fit an "active chemical or biological weapon within minutes of receiving the command to attack. The weapons are manufactured at the Institute for Biological Research in a suburb of Nes Ziona."

The same month, a report by the *Independent on Sunday* recorded the views of Jan Medema, head of a team of chemical weapons inspectors at the Dutch Defence Research Institute in The Hague. Medema expressed concern that the volume of DMMP recorded on the El Al jet was too large for routine experiments. Three of the four components crucial for making up Sarin (the two others are isopropanol and hydrogen fluoride) were on board, in quantities sufficient to generate more than a quarter of a tonne of the deadly nerve gas.

Although Israel has consistently denied that it has any chemical weapon or nuclear capabilities, it has previously kidnapped and imprisoned Mordecai Vanunu, a former Israeli technician, for 18 years after he began to leak details of Israel's nuclear weapons programme.

The supplier of the DMPP was Solkatrionic Chemicals in the US. Any possible exposure of America having supplied Israel with chemical weapons would have serious consequences, particularly as the Iraqi government's use of such weapons was employed for propaganda purposes to justify the US launching the Gulf War. Evidence of collaboration with a US/Israeli chemical weapons programme could also undermine the Dutch government at a time when it is supporting the bombing campaign against Serbia. For this reason the parliamentary discussion of the already neutered report will not take place for another month, in the hope that this will allow time for the situation to be defused.



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