

# Ukrainian government offensive blocks MH17 investigation

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Yesterday, for the third day in the row, Dutch and Australian investigators into the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 were prevented from reaching the crash site in eastern Ukraine by a military offensive being waged by the far right regime in Kiev against pro-Russian separatists.

Andriy Lysenko, spokesman for Kiev's National Security and Defence Council, told the media on Monday, that troops had entered Shakhtarsk, Torez and Lutuhyne—the three towns closest to the MH17 wreckage. The Dutch-Australian team reached Shakhtarsk, which is just 10 kilometres from the crash site, on Monday but had to turn back amid sounds of heavy shelling.

Pieter Jaap Aalbersberg, head of the Dutch team, told the media on Tuesday evening: "Our inability to reach the crash site is frustrating. We are losing valuable time to recover the victims' remains." The bodies of almost 100 of the 298 people killed in the disaster have not been recovered. Debris from the aircraft is reportedly strewn over an area of some 30- to 35-square kilometres.

Yesterday, Michael Bociurkiw, spokesman for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), made it absolutely plain that it was the Ukrainian government offensive that halted access to the crash site. Speaking in Donetsk, he said: "We've been dealing with the [pro-Russian] separatists for three months and since the crash happened we've had access every day until this [fighting]."

Bociurkiw said both sides had been clearly informed of what the investigative team was trying to achieve and given precise details of intended route movements, who was in the cars and the vehicles' number plates. "There's no excuse for anyone not to know the stakes in this. They are huge. One third of the passengers'

bodies are still out there. There's a lot of debris there."

However, the US and its allies, which accused pro-Russian separatists of shooting down MH17, of tampering with evidence and desecrating the bodies of the victims, have remained virtually silent on Kiev's military offensive in recent days around the crash site.

No hue and cry has been raised by Western governments or the media about the Ukrainian military's blocking of investigators. Nothing has been said about Kiev's motives in initiating the fighting or preventing the collection of evidence from the site.

The Australian government was in the forefront of denouncing pro-Russian separatists, who controlled the area around the crash, and accusing Moscow of complicity. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop flew to New York last week to personally take charge of the push to secure a UN Security Council resolution on MH17. It called for no fighting at and around the crash site, an independent, international investigation and for "all parties" to cooperate fully.

The UN resolution was principally targeted against Russia and pro-Russian separatists inside Ukraine. Kiev's flagrant breach of the resolution, as well as of last week's promise by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to establish a 40-kilometre ceasefire zone around the crash site, has been greeted by muffled criticism or outright silence by Washington and its allies.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott expressed guarded frustration yesterday. "There is fighting and it's not just the separatists, it's the Ukrainian government as well. They have all made a commitment to use their best endeavours to get the site safe enough for us to go on board... and it's high time those commitments were honoured," he declared.

Foreign Minister Bishop, who is in Kiev with her

Dutch counterpart Frans Timmermans, made no criticism of the Ukrainian regime. Timmermans noted obliquely that “the strategic goal of Ukraine is at odds with our strategic goal.” Both Bishop and Timmermans have secured agreements from Ukrainian officials to allow countries that lost citizens in the disaster to send up to 700 armed guards to the crash site. The agreements are due to be ratified by the Ukrainian parliament tomorrow.

Kiev has made clear that its military operations are specifically aimed at securing control of the crash site and that it will not allow investigators into the area until its goal has been achieved. Andriy Lysenko, a spokesperson for Ukraine’s Security Council, told the media yesterday: “Ukraine can’t guarantee the security of the international experts. When we liberate the area, the international experts will be able to do everything for the investigation.”

The Ukrainian regime’s determination to establish control over the crash site before a serious investigation gets underway suggests a distinct nervousness as to what would be revealed. The Russian military has released data pointing to the possibility that a Ukrainian war plane or Ukrainian ground-to-air missile was responsible for the disaster. The US is yet to provide any evidence to support its allegation that pro-Russian separatists shot down MH17.

Preliminary examinations of the wreckage had already begun. The plane’s black boxes had been handed over to Dutch authorities and are being examined in Britain. The investigation itself is under the control of governments that support Kiev and have denounced Moscow—Australia and the Netherlands.

If the Ukrainian government were genuinely interested in allowing the investigation to proceed, it would have abided by its promise to respect a ceasefire around the site. So the most obvious explanation for Kiev’s military offensive in this precise area is that it wants to cleanse the site of any incriminating evidence or plant false evidence before any investigation proceeds.

In doing so, the Ukrainian regime can count on the complicity of the US and its allies. The Obama administration has urged and assisted the Kiev government to wage its brutal war of attrition to occupy the east of the country and suppress all opposition. UN figures indicate that at least 1,129 people were killed

and 3,442 wounded between mid-April, when the fighting began, and July 26. A sharp rise has occurred since a UN report in mid-June put the death toll at 356. Much of the essential infrastructure in the area, including electrical, water and sewage plants, has been heavily damaged by Ukrainian army shelling and rockets.

Washington’s attitude was underlined by a CNN report yesterday. Citing US officials, it revealed that the US possessed evidence that the Ukrainian military used short range ballistic missiles against separatist fighters. The missiles, which have a range of 80 kilometres and carry a warhead of nearly half a tonne, are the most deadly and destructive weaponry used in the conflict to date.

No details have been released of the impact on civilian populations. One of the American officials involved told CNN that it was unclear if the US would release satellite imagery of the Ukrainian missiles “because these are the good guys.”



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