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1 June 2024

## **MH17 Malaysian Airliner: A Case Study**

**Introduction:** On July 17th, 2014, Malaysia Airlines flight 17, which had departed Amsterdam on its way to Kuala Lumpur, was shot down by a missile attack in the Donetsk region of Eastern Ukraine. Three men were found guilty of shooting down the civilian aircraft, supplied by the Russian military arsenal.<sup>1</sup>

**Facts of the Case:** Flight 17 was a regular 11.5-hour flight from Amsterdam to Malaysia on a Boeing 777-200 plane.<sup>2</sup> Despite the International Civil Aviation Organization declaring the route to have been safe, all 298 people (283 passengers and 15 crew members) died.<sup>3</sup> The perpetrators attacked the aircraft midair by the detonation of a Russian-originated 9N314M warhead. Wreckage fell near Hrabrove and scattered over 20 square miles.<sup>2, 3</sup> The warhead, carried on a 9M38M1 missile, was launched from East Ukraine using a Buk missile system.<sup>1</sup> An international investigation team traced soldier involvement from a Russian military unit based in Kursk, specifically the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade. The Buk had been transported from Russia the day of the crash and overseen by Sergei Dubinsky, one of the men found guilty, who had ordered the transport.<sup>1</sup> Igor Girkin, military commander of the Donetsk People's Republic, a pro-Russian separatist group, was convicted of deploying the missile and employing Russian assistance. Girkin was also identified as a former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) colonel.<sup>2</sup> A third, Leonid Kharchenko, acted on Dubinsky's instructions.<sup>1</sup> Oleg Pulatov, the only member among the accused to have legal representation, was acquitted despite knowledge about the missile. The Dutch government spent 166 million euros, or approximately \$180 million, in the aftermath of the MH17 investigation, prosecution, and the repatriation of victims' bodies.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Dutch government paid 16.5 million euros to next of kin as an advance on compensation.<sup>4</sup>

**Epidemiological aspects of the event:** Rescue workers arrived timely, including Malaysian authorities, who received voice and data recorders from separatist forces.<sup>2</sup> However, the Dutch Ministry of Defense reached the site in November. Researchers reconstructed the fuselage skin of the aircraft and ruled out several potential causes, such as weather, mechanical failure, onboard fire, onboard explosion, and pilot error.<sup>2</sup> They concluded that the missile did not directly strike the craft; rather, the warhead exploded near the cockpit, in turn, forcing shrapnel fragments through the fuselage. A Buk SA-11 surface-to-air system is one of the artillery capable of reaching heights of 33,000 feet. The government of Ukraine likewise intercepted an audio transmission of conversations from separatists speaking about shooting down a plane.<sup>2</sup> Bellingcat, an investigative platform, was utilized to identify links to the Russian 53rd Brigade and investigate soldiers' social media posts for identity confirmation.<sup>1</sup>

**Management of the event:** National security had put in place prevention measures. This act of terror occurred at the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Although Donetsk was a low-conflict zone, due to prior incidents of military planes being shot down, Ukraine had implemented restrictions by closing airspace at low altitudes up to 32,000 feet. Flight 17 had been cruising at

33,000 feet, 1,000 feet above the restricted airspace. Three months prior, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration had put prohibitions on U.S. flights from areas proximate to the region of the crash, citing the potential for misidentification of civil aircraft and conflicting instructions from Ukraine and Russian authorities.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to note that the flight crashed outside of those designated restricted areas and that the International Civil Aviation Organization had designated the flight's route as safe. Given the geopolitical context of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the pro-Russian separatist movements in Luhansk and Donetsk, this incident was in the jurisdiction of national security and international politics. This was likewise a cross-national affair. The Netherlands Army conducted the identification of bodies while the search and recovery mission included 80 forensic police specialists from Malaysia, Australia, and the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup>

The Public Health response was multi-disciplinary and multi-national. Since there were no survivors, medical responses were funneled into the retrieval of bodies and remains. The complexity of the chain of supply shows how unlikely this incident could have been prevented. If the direct supplier for the separatist extremism was a Russian military brigade, and if the acquisition of the Buk was facilitated through Igor's previous intelligence ties, any suspicious purchases would have been difficult to keep track of. The possible gaps here then remain in the transport of the missile. Since Flight 17 had issued no distress signals, there was no error in the chain of communication or prompt action. Given all this information, the response and management were effective and timely. Early leads were corroborated by formal, in-depth investigation, demonstrating swift and accurate intelligence.

Communications of the event: Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko named the jetliner crash an act of terrorism.<sup>7</sup> According to Malaysian Prime Minister Mohd Najib Tun Razak, there was no distress call received from the aircraft.<sup>5</sup> An unnamed separatist leader in Donetsk, Ukraine, denied responsibility, saying his fighters had no action involvement and that they lacked weaponry that could reach such high altitudes. In the aftermath, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed condolences and offered an alternative theory, putting responsibility on Ukraine for antagonizing the region.<sup>5</sup> Russian officials also suggested that a Ukrainian jet fired the missile.<sup>1</sup> Igor Girkin had allegedly tweeted about his forces shooting down a Ukrainian cargo plane but subsequently deleted it.<sup>8</sup>

Summary: There are few words to describe how harrowing and tragic a disaster this was. Although court proceedings suggest that the culprits had intended to shoot down a military craft, given Igor's deleted tweet, the intentions remain dubious. Little to no blame could be put on Malaysian Airlines since they complied with international law and aviation guidelines. In addition, Donetsk had not yet been widely designated as a high-risk region to fly over.

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