

International

Investigators identify a Russian unit in downing of flight MH17

Russia's 53rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade named in shooting

BUNNIK: A missile system from the 53rd anti-aircraft brigade of the Russian Armed Forces was used to shoot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014, prosecutors investigating the disaster said yesterday. The airliner was hit by a Russian-made missile on July 17, 2014, with 298 people on board, two-thirds of them Dutch, over territory held by pro-Russian separatists. All aboard died. "The buk (missile system) that was used came from the Russian army, the 53rd brigade," Chief Dutch Prosecutor Fred Westerbeke said.

"We know that was used, but the people in charge of this buk, we don't know." Investigators appealed to the public to come forward and help identify members of the crew who operated the missile and determine how high up the chain of command the order originated. "The Russian Federation didn't help us in providing us the information we brought out into the open today," Westerbeke said. "They didn't give us this information, although a buk (missile system) from their military forces was used."

Russia has denied involvement in the incident. There was no immediate comment from Moscow on the investigative development. In an interim up-

date on their investigation, prosecutors said they had trimmed their list of possible suspects from more than a hundred to several dozen. He said investigators were not yet ready to identify individual suspects publicly or to issue indictments, but that when they do he expects cooperation, or a firm international political response. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte cut short a trip to India to return in time for a cabinet meeting on Friday to discuss the latest findings in the inquiry, the ANP news agency reported.

A Joint Investigation Team, drawn from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, the Netherlands and Ukraine, is gathering evidence for a criminal prosecution in the downing of the plane. Ukrainian Army General Vasyl Hrytsak, a member of the investigation team, told Reuters it would be crucial to pinpoint who issued the orders to move the missile system. "The next crucially important step is to identify some members of the military in the 53rd brigade of the Armed Forces of (Russia)...who can directly say who was involved in the transfer or operation of the buk (missile system)."

The Dutch Safety Board concluded in an October 2015 report that the Boeing 777 was struck by a Russian-made Buk missile. Dutch prosecutors



Plane shot down in 2014, killing all 298 aboard



HRABOVE: File photo shows part of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 at the crash site in the village of Hrabove (Grabovo), some 80km east of Donetsk. —AFP

said in September 2016 that 100 "persons of interest" had been identified in the investigation, while Australian and Malaysian officials had initially expressed hope that suspects' names would be made public in 2017. Eventual suspects are likely

to be tried in absentia in the Netherlands after Russia used its veto to block a UN Security Council resolution seeking to create an international tribunal to oversee criminal complaints stemming from the incident.—Reuters

Ukraine bans Russian news agency

KIEV: Ukraine yesterday banned Russia's state-run RIA Novosti news agency, a week after one of its journalists was detained in Kiev and accused of treason. According to the new sanctions list of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (NSDC), the RIA Novosti office as well as the Interselekt company which carried out all the agency's economic activities in Kiev are banned for three years. Sanctions include the blocking of assets, limiting or stopping the provision of telecommunications services, and blocking access to the website www.rian.com.ua.

The director of the public media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya, parent company of RIA Novosti, said the new sanctions were "an indicator of impotence" of the current Ukrainian "regime". "It has nothing left to do, but to pursue its own citizens, to persecute journalists, to pursue freedom of speech, to ban respected media," Dmitry Kiselev was quoted as saying by RIA Novosti. On May 15, Ukraine's SBU security service raided the Kiev offices of RIA Novosti, saying the agency and its journalists had been "used as tools in a hybrid war against Ukraine".

The same day RIA Novosti journalist Kyrylo Vyshynsky, a Ukrainian national who received a Russian passport in 2015, was detained near his house in Kiev and accused of treason. On May 17, Ukrainian court ruled Vyshynsky should be held in detention until his trial. The SBU accused Vyshynsky of travelling to Crimea in 2014 to carry out "subversive" reporting to justify the peninsula's annexation by Russia. —AFP

Due in jail, Spanish rapper vanishes in free speech row

MADRID: Spanish rapper Valtoryc, due to begin a three-and-a-half year jail term for "glorifying terror", insulting the king and issuing threats, was nowhere to be found yesterday as debate over free speech raged in the country. According to media reports Jose Miguel Arenas Beltran-better known as Valtoryc-has left the country, but there was no official confirmation and his whereabouts remained a mystery.

"We've been three weeks without any news from him," Muly Embarek, a member of the 24-year-old's support group said in Brussels at an event on freedom of expression in the European parliament. If it is confirmed, Valtoryc's escape will come just months after Catalan separatist leaders went into self-exile to escape Spanish authorities over their role in a failed secession bid. He is just one of several Twitter users and rappers who have recently been judged-and some sentenced to jail-for glorifying terror or insulting the king in their comments or song lyrics, causing mounting concern over free speech in Spain.

Valtoryc was sentenced last year for lyrics published online in 2012 and 2013 at a time when he was a little-known rapper in the Balearic Islands. These included: "Let them be as frightened as a police officer in the Basque Country" and "the king has a rendezvous at the village square, with a noose around his neck." The reference to the Basque Country hinted at violence by ETA, the separatist group that for decades staged attacks across Spain that left hundreds of officials and civilians dead. He also rapped against Jorge Campos, the head

of Actua Baleares, a party that defends Spanish unity. Valtoryc has since been hit by another complaint by Campos over a recent concert in which he shouted: "Kill a fucking Civil Guard (police) officer tonight." The rapper had been free on bail pending the scheduled start of his prison term yesterday. But on Wednesday, he posted a cryptic tweet: "Tomorrow they will knock down the door of my house to put me in jail. For some songs. Tomorrow Spain is going to make a fool of itself, once more. I'm not going to make it easy for them, it's legitimate and an obligation to disobey this fascist state. Here, no one surrenders."

Free speech under threat?

His lyrics have divided opinion, with some saying they should not land him in jail in a democracy, while others stress that free speech has its limits. It's "not permission to say whatever one wants," said Antonio Torres del Moral, a constitutional law specialist. But for Xavier Arbos, a constitutional law professor at the University of Barcelona, there is a clear "regression with regards to freedom of expression" in Spain. "We're sending a message that groups which feel offended can restrict (people's) freedoms via criminal law, and that's very negative," he told AFP. "The penal code must be the last resort and must be used under the principle of minimal intervention."

In March, Amnesty International said a Spanish law banning "glorification of terrorism" had created a "chilling" environment in which people are increasingly afraid to express alternative views or make controversial jokes. Earlier this week, Spanish Oscar-winner Javier Bardem also sounded the alarm over free speech in Spain as he came out in support of fellow actor Willy Toledo who is due to be questioned by a judge for alleged blasphemy. "It seems to me that being able to (legally) punish (an opinion) is a setback that harks back to the era of Franco," Bardem told reporters in Madrid, referring to the dictatorship of Francisco Franco.—AFP