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Barack Obama

Statement on the Downing Malaysia Airlines Flight 17



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Good morning, everybody.

Yesterday, Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 took off from Amsterdam and was shot down over Ukraine near the Russian border. Nearly 300 innocent lives were taken -- men, women, children, infants -- who had nothing to do with the crisis in Ukraine. Their deaths are an outrage of unspeakable proportions.

We know at least one American citizen, Quinn Lucas Schansman, was killed. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family for this terrible loss.

Yesterday, I spoke with the leaders of Ukraine, Malaysia, and the Netherlands. I told them that our thoughts and prayers are with all the families and that the American people stand with them during this difficult time. Later today, I'll be speaking to Prime Minister Abbott of Australia, which also suffered a terrible loss.

By far, the country that lost the most people on board the plane was the Netherlands. From the days of our founding, the Dutch have been close friends and stalwart allies of the United States of America. And today, I want the Dutch people to know that we stand with you, shoulder to shoulder, in our grief and in our absolute determination to get to the bottom of what happened.

Here's what we know so far.



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Evidence indicates that the plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile that was launched from an area that is controlled by Russian-backed separatists inside of Ukraine. We also know that this is not the first time a plane has been shot down in eastern Ukraine. Over the last several weeks, Russian-backed separatists have shot down a Ukrainian transport plane and a Ukrainian helicopter, and they claimed responsibility for shooting down a Ukrainian fighter jet. Moreover, we know that these separatists have received a steady flow of support from Russia. This includes arms and training. It includes heavy weapons, and it includes anti-aircraft weapons.

Here's what must happen now. This was a global tragedy. An Asian airliner was destroyed in European skies, filled with citizens from many countries. So there has to be a credible international investigation into what happened. The U.N. Security Council has endorsed this investigation, and we will hold all its members -- including Russia -- to their word. In order to facilitate that investigation, Russia, pro-Russian separatists, and Ukraine must adhere to an immediate cease-fire. Evidence must not be tampered with. Investigators need to access the crash site. And the solemn task of returning those who were lost on board the plane to their loved ones needs to go forward immediately.

The United States stands ready to provide any assistance that is necessary. We've already offered the support of the FBI and the National Transportation Safety Board, which has experience in working with international partners on these types of investigations. They are on their way, personnel from the FBI and the National Transportation Safety Board.

In the coming hours and days, I'll continue to be in close contact with leaders from around the world as we respond to this catastrophe. Our immediate focus will be on recovering those who were lost, investigating exactly what happened, and putting forward the facts.

I want to point out there will likely be misinformation as well. I think it's very important for folks to sift through what is factually based and what is simply speculation. No one can deny the truth that is revealed in the awful images that we all have seen. And the eyes of the world are on eastern Ukraine, and we are going to make sure that the truth is out.

More broadly, I think it's important for us to recognize that this outrageous event underscores that it is time for peace and security to be restored in Ukraine. For months, we've supported a pathway to peace, and the Ukrainian government has reached out to all Ukrainians, put forward a peace plan, and lived up to a cease-fire, despite repeated violations by the separatists -- violations that took the lives of Ukrainian soldiers and personnel.

Moreover, time and again, Russia has refused to take the concrete steps necessary to deescalate the situation. I spoke to President Putin yesterday in the wake of additional sanctions that we had imposed. He said he wasn't happy with them, and I told him that we have been very clear from the outset that we want Russia to take the path that would result in peace in Ukraine, but so far at least, Russia has failed to take that path.



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Instead, it has continued to violate Ukrainian sovereignty and to support violent separatists. It has also failed to use its influence to press the separatists to abide by a cease-fire. That's why, together with our allies, we've imposed growing costs on Russia.

So now is, I think, a somber and appropriate time for all of us to step back and take a hard look at what has happened. Violence and conflict inevitably lead to unforeseen consequences. Russia, these separatists, and Ukraine all have the capacity to put an end to the fighting. Meanwhile, the United States is going to continue to lead efforts within the world community to de-escalate the situation; to stand up for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine; and to support the people of Ukraine as they courageously work to strengthen their democracy and make their own decisions about how they should move forward.

Before I take just a couple of questions let me remark on one other issue. This morning, I spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel about the situation in Gaza. We discussed Israel's military operation in Gaza, including its efforts to stop the threat of terrorist infiltration through tunnels into Israel. I reaffirmed my strong support for Israel's right to defend itself. No nation should accept rockets being fired into its borders, or terrorists tunneling into its territory. In fact, while I was having the conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu, sirens went off in Tel Aviv.

I also made clear that the United States, and our friends and allies, are deeply concerned about the risks of further escalation and the loss of more innocent life. And that's why we've indicated, although we support military efforts by the Israelis to make sure that rockets are not being fired into their territory, we also have said that our understanding is the current military ground operations are designed to deal with the tunnels, and we are hopeful that Israel will continue to approach this process in a way that minimizes civilian casualties and that all of us are working hard to return to the cease-fire that was reached in November of 2012.

Secretary Kerry is working to support Egypt's initiative to pursue that outcome. I told Prime Minister Netanyahu that John is prepared to travel to the region following additional consultations.

Let me close by making one additional comment. On board Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17, there were apparently nearly 100 researchers and advocates traveling to an international conference in Australia dedicated to combating AIDS/HIV. These were men and women who had dedicated their own lives to saving the lives of others and they were taken from us in a senseless act of violence.

In this world today, we shouldn't forget that in the midst of conflict and killing, there are people like these -- people who are focused on what can be built rather than what can be destroyed; people who are focused on how they can help people that they've never met; people who define themselves not by what makes them different from other people but by the



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humanity that we hold in common. It's important for us to lift them up and to affirm their lives. And it's time for us to heed their example.

The United States of America is going to continue to stand for the basic principle that people have the right to live as they choose; that nations have the right to determine their own destiny; and that when terrible events like this occur, the international community stands on the side of justice and on the side of truth.

So with that, let me take just a couple questions. I'll start with you, Julie.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President. Just on a technical matter, does the U.S. believe that this passenger jet was targeted, or that those people who shot it down may have been going after a military -- thought they were going after a military aircraft? And more broadly, this incident does seem to escalate the crisis in Ukraine to a level we haven't seen before. Does that change your calculus in terms of what the U.S. and perhaps Europe should be doing in terms of a response?

President Obama: Well, I think it's too early for us to be able to guess what the intentions of those who might have launched this surface-to-air missile might have had. The investigation is going to be ongoing, and I think what we'll see is additional information surfacing over the next 24 hours, 72 hours, the next week, the next month.

What we know right now, what we have confidence in saying right now is that a surface-to-air missile was fired and that's what brought the jet down. We know -- or we have confidence in saying that that shot was taken within a territory that is controlled by the Russian separatists.

But I think it's very important for us to make sure that we don't get out ahead of the facts. And at this point, in terms of identifying specifically what individual or group of individuals or personnel ordered the strike, how it came about, those are things that I think are still going to be subject to additional information that we're going to be gathering. And we're working with the entire international community to make sure that the focus is on getting to the bottom of this thing and being truthful.

And my concern is obviously that there's been a lot of misinformation generated in eastern Ukraine generally. This should snap everybody's heads to attention and make sure that we don't have time for propaganda, we don't have time for games. We need to know exactly what happened. And everybody needs to make sure that we're holding accountable those who committed this outrage.

With respect to the second question, as you're aware, before this terrible incident happened we had already ratcheted up sanctions against Russia. And I think the concern not just of Russian officials but of the markets about the impact that this could have on the Russian economy is there for all to see.



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I made clear to President Putin that our preferred path is to resolve this diplomatically. But that means that he and the Russian government have to make a strategic decision: Are they going to continue to support violent separatists whose intent is to undermine the government of Ukraine? Or are they prepared to work with the government of Ukraine to arrive at a cease-fire and a peace that takes into account the interests of all Ukrainians?

There has been some improved language at times over the last month coming from the Kremlin and coming from President Putin, but what we have not seen is an actual transition and different actions that would give us confidence that that's the direction that they want to take.

And we will continue to make clear that as Russia engages in efforts that are supporting the separatists, that we have the capacity to increase the costs that we impose on them. And we will do so. Not because we're interested in hurting Russia for the sake of hurting Russia, but because we believe in standing up for the basic principle that a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity has to be respected, and it is not the United States or Russia or Germany or any other country that should be deciding what happens in that country.

Question: At this point do you see any U.S. military role that could be effective?

President Obama: We don't see a U.S. military role beyond what we've already been doing in working with our NATO partners and some of the Baltic States, giving them reassurances that we are prepared to do whatever is required to meet our alliance obligations.

Steve Holland.

Question: Sir, thank you. How much blame for this do you put on President Putin? And will you use this incident now to push the Europeans for stronger action?

President Obama: We don't exactly know what happened yet, and I don't want to, as I said before, get out ahead of the facts. But what I do know is, is that we have seen a ticking up of violence in eastern Ukraine that, despite the efforts of the Ukrainian government to abide by a cease-fire and to reach out and agree to negotiations, including with the separatists, that has been rebuffed by these separatists. We know that they are heavily armed and that they are trained. And we know that that's not an accident. That is happening because of Russian support.

So it is not possible for these separatists to function the way they're functioning, to have the equipment that they have -- set aside what's happened with respect to the Malaysian Airlines -- a group of separatists can't shoot down military transport planes or, they claim, shoot down fighter jets without sophisticated equipment and sophisticated training. And that is coming from Russia.



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So we don't yet know exactly what happened with respect to the Malaysian Airlines, although obviously we're beginning to draw some conclusions given the nature of the shot that was fired. There are only certain types of anti-aircraft missiles that can reach up 30,000 feet and shoot down a passenger jet. We have increasing confidence that it came from areas controlled by the separatists. But without having a definitive judgment on those issues yet, what we do know is, is that the violence that's taking place there is facilitated in part -- in large part -- because of Russian support. And they have the ability to move those separatists in a different direction.

If Mr. Putin makes a decision that we are not going to allow heavy armaments and the flow of fighters into Ukraine across the Ukrainian-Russian border, then it will stop. And if it stops, then the separatists will still have the capacity to enter into negotiations and try to arrive at the sort of political accommodations that Mr. Putin himself says he wants to see. He has the most control over that situation, and so far, at least, he has not exercised it.

Question: Tougher sanctions in Europe -- will you push for them?

President Obama: Well, I think that this certainly will be a wake-up call for Europe and the world that there are consequences to an escalating conflict in eastern Ukraine; that it is not going to be localized, it is not going to be contained. What we've seen here is -- just in one country alone, our great allies, the Dutch, 150 or more of their citizens being killed. And that, I think, sadly brings home the degree to which the stakes are high for Europe, not simply for the Ukrainian people, and that we have to be firm in our resolve in making sure that we are supporting Ukraine in its efforts to bring about a just cease-fire and that we can move towards a political solution to this.

I'm going to make this the last question. Lisa Lerer, Bloomberg.

Question: Do we know yet if there were other Americans on board beyond the person you mentioned? And how do you prevent stricter restrictions, economic sanctions from shocking the global economy and --

President Obama: We have been pretty methodical over the last 24 hours in working through the flight manifest and identifying which passengers might have had a U.S. passport. At this point, the individual that I mentioned is the sole person that we can definitively say was a U.S. or dual citizen.

Because events are moving so quickly, I don't want to say with absolute certainty that there might not be additional Americans, but at this stage, having worked through the list, been in contact with the Malaysian government, which processed the passports as folks were boarding, this is our best assessment of the number of Americans that were killed. Obviously that does nothing to lessen our outrage about all those families. Regardless of nationality, it is a heartbreaking event.



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With respect to the effect of sanctions on the economy, we have consistently tried to tailor these sanctions in ways that would have an impact on Russia, on their economy, on their institutions or individuals that are aiding and abetting in the activities that are taking place in eastern Ukraine, while minimizing the impacts on not only the U.S. economy but the global economy.

It is a relevant consideration that we have to keep in mind. The world economy is integrated; Russia is a large economy; there's a lot of financial flows between Russia and the rest of the world. But we feel confident that at this point the sanctions that we've put in place are imposing a cost on Russia, that their overall impact on the global economy is minimal. It is something that we have to obviously pay close attention to, but I think Treasury, in consultation with our European partners, have done a good job so far on that issue.

Thank you very much, everybody.